Tending Scripture's Wounds: Suffering, Moral Formation, and the Bible

by

Nathan Hershberger

Graduate Program in Religion
Duke University

Date:_____

Approved:

_____
Luke Bretherton, Supervisor

_____
Peter Casarella

_____
Eugene Rogers

_____
Lauren Winner

_____
Janet Martin Soskice

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Religion in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2022

ABSTRACT

Tending Scripture's Wounds: Suffering, Moral Formation, and the Bible

by

Nathan Hershberger

Graduate Program in Religion
Duke University

Date:_____
Approved:

_____
Luke Bretherton, Supervisor

_____
Peter Casarella

_____
Eugene Rogers

_____
Lauren Winner

_____
Janet Martin Soskice

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Religion in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2022

Abstract

At times, scripture shocks and puzzles. How might Christians understand scripture's aporia and its embeddedness in modes of domination? Confessional accounts often seek to reduce textual problems to misreading. Conversely, approaches that center oppression tend to find the text incorrigibly repressive. Few approaches imagine the text as both problematic *and* generative. This dissertation steers both the postliberal recovery of figural reading and the liberationist attention to context alike away from excessively theoretical construals of *how* reading ought to work, and toward biographical accounts of the skills, virtues, and pitfalls that attend struggles to read scripture well amid profound moral difficulties. Attending to three case studies of individuals reading the Bible under conditions of suffering and loss I ask: when Christians are wounded in their reading, how can scripture also form them well?

In what follows I provide an account of the wounds of scripture and its readers. These include the wounds within scripture (painful passages, passages that contradict others) and the wounds that Christians inflict on others through destructive readings. Applying the language of wounds (with its full Christological connotation) to scripture permits Christians to take seriously the difficulty of the Bible alongside its endless capacity, by the Spirit, to heal and transform. I argue that scripture's capacity to form well amid these wounds is a matter not so much of hermeneutical procedure but of embodied response. Thus, while my first chapter lays out a conceptual account of wounds

in scripture and its readers, the succeeding chapters display three practical case studies of individual readers. I attend to apocalypticism through the life of Anna Jansz, a sixteenth-century Anabaptist martyr; the complex relationship between slavery and the Bible in the autobiography of the nineteenth-century emancipated preacher John Jea; and the pain of scriptural accounts of election in the writings of the contemporary Palestinian Melkite Archbishop Elias Chacour. In all three cases the Spirit's grace, manifest in biography and historical circumstance, tends to these wounds, bringing life out of death on the pattern of the wounds of Christ.

This dissertation contributes to the field of scripture and ethics. Through attending to the enduring difficulty and redemptive possibility of scripture in the lives of particular readers, I hope to demonstrate that scripture's difficulties cannot be resolved simply by hermeneutical procedure. Instead, reading scripture well requires the embodied response of a life.

For Kaitlin

Contents

List of Figures

Acknowledgements

Countless people have shaped this work. The questions that guide this dissertation first pressed into my life during three years I spent in Erbil, Iraq with Mennonite Central Committee. I am so grateful to Fr. Fadi Lion and all the students at St. Peter's Chaldean Catholic Seminary, as well as Fr. Douglas al-Bazi and the people who lived at the Mar Elia displaced persons camp. They all showed me what it means to tend to a wounded people.

I first explored the relations between interpretation and the life of a community during an M.A. at the University of Virginia. Of the many lessons I learned from Peter Ochs there, the one I treasure most is his dedication to scholarship as a form of care for those who are suffering. His teaching has profoundly shaped this work. At Duke University, I have benefitted from a wealth of colleagues and teachers. As my adviser, Luke Bretherton has guided me every step of the way. Luke's endless gifts of time and his penetrating combination of theological and historical insight enabled me to see what this project could become far more clearly than I could have otherwise. In addition to Luke, my committee has been invaluable, and I am grateful to them for many clarifying conversations. Gene Rogers taught me how to write and think theologically. Lauren Winner and Peter Casarella pressed me to think more carefully about historical arguments. Janet Martin Soskice modeled wrestling with difficulties with grace. Beyond this, Edgardo Colón-Emeric, Joe Winters, and Amy Laura Hall each contributed to my scholarly formation.

The insights of colleagues at Duke and elsewhere have buoyed me up. In conversations over lunch, dissertation writing groups, and reflections after teaching, friends have deepened my sense of teaching and writing in the theological academy. For this and more I am grateful to Alberto La Rosa Rojas, Emily Dubie, Erin Risch Zoutendam, Matt Elmore, Ryan Juskus, Jackson

Adamah, Erica Ridderman, Mike Grigoni, Allison Wattenbarger, Glenn Stallsmith, Jonathan Ottoway, Wilco de Vries, Brett Stonecipher, Blair Wilner, Christina Moss, and Adam Tietje.

Many people graciously offered to read chapter drafts and offered invaluable feedback. Isaac Villegas, Peter Dula and Ashleigh Elser helped me see that my first chapter had to begin with problems, not only solutions. Mary Sprunger went out of her way to aid my third chapter's research by translating portions of a Middle Dutch account of Anna Jansz's death. Ronald Rittgers and Alain Epp Weaver sharpened my third and fifth chapters, respectively.

Many kinds of institutional support made this work possible. I am so grateful to the Kenan Institute for Ethics and the Graduate Program in Religion, especially Carol Rush. The librarians at Duke went above and beyond to provide online resources during the pandemic. Various chapter drafts benefitted from feedback at the Duke Ethics & Theology Colloquium and the American Academy of Religion Scriptural Reasoning and Sacred Text & Ethics Units.

Finally, I am grateful for the love of my church community and family. Many of my exegetical reflections in what follows were first worked out in sermons at Chapel Hill Mennonite Fellowship (often shaped by discussion with Isaac Villegas) and sharpened during our sermon response time. Worshipping there taught me that interpretation is a collective act. My parents Jim and Ann Hershberger have been a source of continual encouragement in this work and have demonstrated what it means to tend one's life in witness to Christ. The questions, delights, and needs of my children Leo, Julian, and Felix have been a constant reminder that theology's joyful task is to trace God's faithfulness in the ordinariness of life.

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife Kaitlin Heatwole. She not only gave me countless gifts of time to do this work, but also helped me clarify my muddled prose. In this and so much more, her love is the best picture I have of the tending the coming pages describe.

Introduction

An approach to the problem

From the mountain behind the small Iraqi town of Alqosh one can, on a clear day, glimpse the edge of Mosul. In 2016 I stood there and strained my eyes toward the horizon. Mosul is a city of over a million people, built on the ruins of Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian empire. In 2016 the short-lived Islamic State (ISIS) had occupied Mosul for two years, perpetrating atrocities that the Iraqi army and American airpower now approached to avenge. Alqosh, meanwhile, is a small but ancient town, a historic center for the Iraqi Christian and Jewish communities, though it has been nearly exclusively Christian since the Jewish exodus from Iraq in 1952. On that day in Alqosh I stood just uphill from an abandoned synagogue where a tomb reputedly preserves the remains of the prophet Nahum. Nahum was one of the fiercest biblical detractors of Nineveh/Mosul, and his diatribes fit the scene all too well. The Christians of Alqosh had spent the past two years in fear and anger at the threat that distant Mosul/Nineveh signified, in ISIS' hands. I could hear that same anger in Nahum's prophesy to Nineveh. "I am against you, says the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will let nations look on your nakedness…I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt."[1] Looking out over the Nineveh plains and ahead to months of urban warfare that would devastate Mosul's people, scripture's ancient promises seemed not nearly ancient enough.

I had been living and working in northern Iraq for two years by then, immersed in the life of the Chaldean Catholic Church in the city of Erbil and teaching in a high school alongside Christian refugees, some of them from Mosul. With their pain in mind, I could not but feel the

[1] Nahum 3: 5-6. New Revised Standard Version. All following biblical references will be noted parenthetically.

justice of Nahum's imprecations, and God's. How righteous this wrath! But at that moment I felt the pull also of God's remonstrances to Jonah in that other biblical oracle of Nineveh. Should we not be concerned with Mosul, "that great city," in which there were more than a million people "who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:11). More than any time before or since, I felt then how intimately the testimony of scripture was bound up with the bloody history that had delivered us to our present. How could this tangled intimacy prove morally transformative? With our own sentiments mirrored back at us in these texts, would scripture not reinforce the worst in us, its vengeful readers?

Such worries emerged first and more broadly out of my own Mennonite background. A year earlier, in 2015, I was overcome with shame and horror when I first read the historian Rachel Waltner Goossen's complete account of John Howard Yoder's manipulative abuse.[2] I had been inspired and shaped by his work and had just published an article on resonances between Yoder and Hans Frei. I knew vaguely of Yoder's abuse, but not the full extent. I felt convicted and undone. Yoder was not all of Anabaptism, nor was I one of his uncritical champions. But I felt that I was a part of a system that sustained men like him.

More fundamentally I worried that his abuses were not a horrific peculiarity, but consonant with the deepest hopes and failures of Anabaptism (something I explore more in my third chapter). I had grown up immersed in the stories of radical reformers martyred in the sixteenth century. These stories fed my sense of Christian witness. But I have suffered little and in adulthood I began to wonder how the celebration of Anabaptist suffering for the sake of

---

[2] Rachel Waltner Goossen, "Defanging the Beast: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89/1 (January 2015): 7-80. Goossen's historical work in the essay is the most extensive and complete account of Yoder's abuses. Yoder's abuses were widely known before then, having been first reported in *The Elkhart Truth* in the 1990s, but Goossen's work presented the full extent in more detail.

righteousness might have malformed my community even as it enabled enduring witness. It is good to pursue the good even when it is costly. But when that cost is fetishized, we may lose sight of the good for which it is borne. In the case of my own tradition, the strident clarity of Anabaptist efforts to faithfully enact the gospel's vision of community has often occasioned a proud and endlessly schismatic inflexibility. Yoder used this very vision of a radically faithful community enduring ostracism to justify his abuse. To him, the complaints of his victims and those who tried to hold him to account were but the evidence of his own radical faithfulness (just as schismatic factions before him had seen their intra-ecclesial conflicts as a fruit of righteousness). What inspired the Anabaptist martyrs also armed Yoder with arguments. And so I wondered: how can the resources of my tradition bless once more, when they are entwined with our deepest failures?

To those two ecclesial formations I add a third. Part of my childhood and adolescence was spent in Nicaragua, where I fell in love with liberation theology and socialist politics. The 1990 electoral loss of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua echoed later into my teenage years as a righteous lost cause unjustly defeated. Joined with my Mennonite sensibilities, I grew up with the conviction that suffering for political justice was inseparable from Christian faithfulness. I watched with surprise and dismay when the Sandinistas swept back into power in 2006 and—not at all purified by the unjust suffering they had endured—bested the right-wing at their own game of repressive and corrupt autocracy.[3]

---

[3] After his return to power, Daniel Ortega made alliances with business leaders, maintained strict party loyalty within his movement, and eventually carried out a brutal crackdown on protests against his rule in 2018. "In Nicaragua, Ortega was on the Ropes, Now he has Protestors on the Run." *New York Times,* December 12, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/24/world/americas/nicaragua-protests-daniel-ortega.html>

Analogous questions emerge from each of these formations. Where could Latin American liberation theology turn, when the political project to which it was attached seemed to have failed? Can the Anabaptist emphasis on the bold enactment of the gospel serve contemporary Mennonite communities, when its effects included the life of figures like John Howard Yoder? And can scripture form Iraqi Christians well in response to their suffering, when the Bible pulsates with the same rhythms of violence that afflict them? Audre Lorde famously declared that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."[4] Are the tools of theology the sort that Lorde warned against? Will our scriptures and histories fund healing and transformation? Or, implicated in the creation of these crises, will they only exacerbate the harms they have helped produce?

The problem

Though the concerns I introduce here may seem distinctly contemporary, the English poet William Langland posed these issues in the fourteenth century with devastating starkness. In the final chapter of his poem *Piers Plowman,* personified vices besiege the allegorized forces of good in a barn called Holy Church. At first it seems these heroes—the narrator Will along with Conscience and other virtues—might hold out. After the long wanderings of the poem through the redemption accomplished by Christ and the purification of the world, one might have expected it to conclude by celebrating the purity of the church. Instead, Langland places disaster in his poem's final lines.

Under siege and plagued by the sicknesses of sin, the denizens of the barn cry out for a cure. But when a friar comes with the sacraments to aid them, these treatments only desensitize

[4] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 107.

the consciences of those who receive them, enabling further sin.[5] Despairing that the place which should have been a refuge has become an opium den (Langland beat Marx to the punch), Conscience and Will exit to seek that enigmatic figure of Christ, Piers the Plowman. The poem ends with unresolved ambiguity.[6] As Natalie Carnes put it, the ending leaves us to answer this question: "What happens when the cure has become the poison?"[7]

The Bible is a cure to which Christians perennially turn. The fourth-century theologian Origen of Alexandria compared scripture to medicinal "herbs," suggesting that a Christian should become "a botanist of the scriptures" and apply the words of the Bible in a fitting way to ailing bodies and souls.[8] On this view, when Christians experience suffering and tend to that suffering with scripture, it occasions healing and transformation. Womanist theologian Shawn Copeland notes as much, writing that "from some women and men, suffering coaxes real freedom and growth" when accompanied by the Bible.[9] Besieged in the barn like the figures of *Piers Plowman,* Christians may turn to scripture to tend to their wounds.

---

[5] Middle English original: "with his fisyk this folk havth enchaunted / And doth men drinke dwale, that they drat no synne." William Langland, *Piers Plowman,* C-text, edited by Derek Pearsall (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2008), XXII.378-9, page 377. Contemporary English translation from *Piers Plowman: The C Version* translated by George Economou (Philadelphia, UPenn Press, 1996), XXII 378-9, page 219.

[6] David Aers summarizes this dialectical ambiguity. "Langland always moves from the most intense, joyful visionary insights in the history of human sin and humanity's continual resistance to divine gifts." David Aers, *Versions of Election: From Langland & Aquinas to Calvin & Milton* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2020), 38. Crucially, Aers notes that Langland presents no institutional solution to the problem of human virtue, even if Aers reads in his poem a kind of congregationalism. See Aers' *Beyond Reformation? An Essay on William Langland's Piers Plowman and the End of Constantinian Christianity* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2015), 142.

[7] Natalie Carnes, "Reply to Armstrong's Response," *Syndicate* book symposium on Carnes' *Image and Presence,* September 3, 2019 <https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/image-and-presence/>

[8] "Consider the scriptures as analogous to all herbs, or as one perfect body of reason. But if you are not a botanist of the scriptures or an anatomist of the prophetic words, do not suppose something to have been written in vain, but blame yourself rather than the holy letters, when you cannot discover the rational order of what is written." Origen, *Philocalia* 10.2. Quoted in Mark Randall James, *Learning the Language of Scripture: Origen, Wisdom, and the Logic of Interpretation* (Boston: Brill, 2021), 154.

[9] M. Shawn Copeland, "Wading Through Many Sorrows: Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective," in Emilie Townes ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (New York: Maryknoll, 2002), 109.

But like those figures in *Piers Plowman*, tending may go awry. If moments of painful crisis may occasion transformation for some, Copeland notes that "from other women and men…[suffering] extracts a bitter venom."[10] This is most likely to happen when the source of moral authority one turns to in the hope of healing is implicated in that which one suffers. At least sometimes, when Christians turn to scripture they find that it reinscribes the pain that afflicts them. And what then? When scripture wounds its readers in that way, how can it also form them for just and loving community?

Scholarly context

The present work contributes to contemporary scholarly conversations about the relationship between scripture and ethics. Such conversations have tended to be dominated by attempts to outline procedures that bridge the putative gap between text and life, between history and the present, between scripture and ethics. Such approaches assume that if the proper relation between biblical revelation and ethical reasoning is established, both areas can proceed on firmer footing. Though the present work does not entirely evade this approach, it does turn decisively away from procedure and toward participation.

To clarify the intervention I propose, in this section I examine two broad contemporary hermeneutical approaches: the postliberal, tradition-oriented drive to recover precritical exegesis and liberation theology's emphasis on the social location of the reader. While quite distinct, at their most insightful both movements have at their core a recovery of reading as participation in Christ. Guided by Hans Frei, himself influential in the first of these approaches, I understand both movements as critical responses to the shift toward compulsory univocity of biblical meaning in

[10] Copeland, "Wading Through Many Sorrows," 109.

the modern period; that is, the idea that a given passage of scripture always has one and only one meaning.[11] While I resonate deeply with recoveries of precritical exegesis and liberationist approaches as a response to this modern mode of reading, I suggest that each fails to pay sufficient attention to the way difficulties linger in the text regardless of the hermeneutic employed, risking a turn away from participation and back to procedure. This is the entry point for my work. I seek to explore what it means to live well with scripture when it is abidingly difficult in morally significant ways.

First, figural reading has enjoyed a remarkable resurgence, at least among theologians. One origin point for this is Henri de Lubac's re-presentation of medieval exegesis and the broader movement for *ressourcement* among mid twentieth-century French Catholic intellectuals. On the Protestant side, stimulated both by Catholic *ressourcement* but also by Brevard Childs' canonical approach in biblical studies, Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and others sought to reframe the study and use of scripture away from historical-critical methods and toward a mode of reading styled variously "theological," "narrative," "canonical," "figural," "allegorical," "spiritual," or "sacramental." Amid important differences, this movement broadly aims to retrieve classical modes of scriptural interpretation, with Origen and Augustine as touchstone figures.[12]

---

[11] Frei argues that both historical-critical, demythologizing, and fundamentalist approaches to the Bible all represent a formally similar breakdown with respect to the Bible. In such approaches, whether treated as "history or else allegory or myth, the meaning of the stories was finally something different from the stories or depictions themselves," and the task of hermeneutics was to arrive at that meaning, finally distinct from the text. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 11. For more on this, see Eugene Rogers, "How Aquinas Reads Scripture," in his *Aquinas and the Supreme Court: Race, Gender, and the Failure of Natural Law in Thomas' Biblical Commentaries* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013).

[12] The literature in this area is too vast to summarize here. Here I detail only the most recent monographs in this area. Joseph Gordon's *Divine Scripture in Human Understanding: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Bible* (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 2019) does a far better job than most at taking account of textual variance. Matthew Levering takes a similar approach in *Participatory Biblical Exegesis* (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 2008) as does Darren Sarrisky in *Reading the Bible Theologically* (New York: Cambridge University Press,

Ephraim Radner has articulated the most sophisticated account of figural reading within this broad contemporary re-appropriation. Radner's complex theological and historical work describes figural reading not as a procedure that humans can master—thereby unlocking the secrets of scripture that moderns have foolishly forgotten—but rather a description of the way God ordinarily enfolds humans into the divine patterns of the Bible. Such reading "emerges *from* the Scriptures, in its parts and whole, as God's own active Word that is the prior agent of all that we are to think and be. It is not a human method of reading brought to bear upon an inert text."[13] Radner's disavowal of method combined with his attention to failure, pain, and struggle, are the greatest strengths of his work. These merits come at the cost of a conception of scripture that removes it from history; it is his scriptural Platonism that enables him to avoid procedure. In his telling, the Bible contains the forms by which God creates time itself. "Scripture is prior to history," such that "time itself…is conformed to the scriptures."[14]

However, for Radner, Christian reading cannot be entirely worked out in advance, but must be discovered in time and with struggle. Unusually among contemporary champions of the recovery of figure and allegory, in *Time and the Word* Radner (quite briefly) explores what happens when figural reading goes wrong by narrating Bernard of Clairvaux's figural justifications for the Crusades. In his support for the Second Crusade perhaps Clairvaux, "had not

---

2019). For more recent reformed and evangelical approaches, see Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017); Craig Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic Press, 2015); and James K.A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation* (Baker Academic, 2012). The *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* series is also a key set of texts for this disposition.

[13]Ephraim Radner, *Time and the Word: Figural Reading of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 285.

[14] Radner, *Time and The Word,* 235, 102.

gone far enough along the textual paths of figure," Radner suggests.[15] This failure "stripped him bare, and led him *back* to another vision."[16] In Radner's hands, his abstract account is flexible enough to accommodate struggle and discovery in time. When Jesus Christ speaks through scripture, "the shape of this speaking is given in the form of our histories."[17] The patterns of scripture enable human lives to join the life of Christ. The purpose of scripture is this transformation.

But, according to his odd construal of scripture's timelessness, for Radner scripture must finally be something entirely other than our history, in order to be capable of transforming. In less capable hands, such accounts can tend towards a dehistoricized, wooden, and narrowly procedural approach to scripture, where allegory risks descending into a formula for extracting worldly truth from an otherworldly text.

While very different in context and orientation, various liberation and contextual theologies have posed formally similar answers to the problem of how to relate scripture and ethics by describing how readers may enter into the Bible's narratives not through allegorical and figural reading, but through the social location of the interpreting community. Though their accounts of the biblical text vary, most liberation theologies emphasize the epistemological privilege of the oppressed. Because of their subject position, the poor, the marginalized, and the powerless have a clearer view of reality and are better able to understand the ethical significance of the Bible. Though somewhat obscure, the clearest performance of this theme is a volume called *The Gospel in Solentiname,* produced by the Nicaraguan Catholic priest and sometime

---

[15] Ibid., 285.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 285.

Sandinista Minister of Culture Ernesto Cardenal.[18] The work is a collection of transcripts of the conversations Cardenal had with his Nicaraguan *campesino* parishioners after each Sunday's gospel reading as they sought to discern the meaning of the day's scripture in their context. *The Gospel in Solentiname* is the most direct expression of the conviction that scripture is best interpreted by base ecclesial communities in which the church struggles for justice with and as the poor. In his introduction Cardenal names and describes some of the most distinctive participants in the recorded dialogues that follow, saying "the authors of this book are these people," not Cardenal. But then he corrects himself: "I am wrong. The true author is the Spirit that has inspired these commentaries," the very same Spirit "who inspired the Gospels."[19] For Cardenal, unlocking the meaning of the gospels required gathering a community whose social location allowed them to see the political implications of biblical texts. Since the 1970s, various authors and communities have sought to enact similar readings of the Bible from specific marginalized subject positions, including Black, Latinx, queer, disabled, feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and other readings. All are shaped by the conviction that those on the underside of history can best grasp the Bible's message.

Liberationist and postliberal approaches are distinct and often contrasted. But at their best both these approaches share this insight: morally formative readings of scripture enable the reader to participate in what and who they read. Both these approaches, at their best, understand reading as a way in which the Spirit joins readers to the body of Christ—whether as the poor or as a participant in a biblical narrative or both. For Radner, to read is to be formed by the narrative

---

[18] Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname,* trans. Donald Walsh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 4 volumes published 1976-1982, republished as a single volume in 2010).
[19] Ernesto Cardenal, translated by Donald Walsh *The Gospel in Solentiname* vol. 2 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975, republished 1985), ix.

patterns and figures of scripture into the image of Christ. For Cardenal, to read is to find not only that scripture describes one's political and social reality but also that the Spirit joins readers into the same movement scripture announces.

Both these movements can also be understood as hermeneutical responses to suffering. For Cardenal, the key to nurturing a revolutionary consciousness among Nicaraguan peasants in the wake of the oppressions of the regime of Anastasio Somoza was gathering them around the Gospels to see their own lives mirrored in them. More broadly, liberation theologies have sought to connect various forms of oppression to biblical texts for the purposes of emancipation. How can the poor read in a way that facilitates liberation?

Meanwhile, the recovery of precritical reading practices have been more conceptual and less closely tied to everyday suffering. However, various parts of this diverse movement have been consistently connected to the crisis of Christian-Jewish relations in the 20th century. Catholic *ressourcement* took place amid the breakdown of European political order that was World War II and the Holocaust. Postliberal Christian theology has taken as one of its central problematics a renewal of Christians and Jewish relations. Figures like Frei and Lindbeck sought to tend to this profound rupture, as well as intra-ecclesial schisms. For postliberals the question was, above all, hermeneutical. How could Christians read scripture in such a way that these wounds would be healed?

I treasure the insights of contextual interpretation and I champion figural reading, but I ask: is hermeneutics enough? Are approaches that center Christian responses to political and social crisis in accounts of interpretive process sufficient? I do not mean to suggest that Ernesto Cardenal thought that *campesinos* reading the Bible together would be enough to overthrow the dictatorial regime of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua. Nor would Ephraim Radner say that

reading figurally can of itself heal ecclesial schism. But what is visible in both movements is a decisive shift to hermeneutics as the arena in which solutions are worked out and applied.

Christian non-supersessionism is a helpful example. In the wake of the Holocaust, some Christian theologians re-examined supersessionist ways of reading the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and concluded that they were neither faithful to the heart of Christian tradition nor conducive to charity towards Jews as siblings. I affirm this shift. As my fifth chapter will suggest, however, while this hermeneutical adjustment is a necessary course-correction, it is not sufficient to eliminate the difficulties, for example, of living with the book of Joshua as a Palestinian Christian after the displacements of 1948—and depending on how it is applied, such a reading shift may even exacerbate them. Neither is the application of a liberationist, contextual hermeneutic entirely sufficient in such a case, for it may result merely in reifying the destructive binaries of the present, as my fifth chapter will describe. A deeper sense of reading as ongoing embodiment is necessary to sustain the insights of both contextual and postliberal approaches.

To put it more theologically, the present work reinforces the shared conviction of both these movements that in reading scripture, the Spirit joins Christians to Christ's body. But if their reading joins Christians to Christ's body, it will join them to his wounds as well. My question, then, is this: how may Christians tend abiding wounds in lives formed by reading scripture?

Scope and methodology

The Word became flesh. It is fitting for accounts of how scripture is encountered to dwell on specific bodies and particular histories. Given this conviction, the heart of this present work is three detailed historical case studies. In each, I profile a specific person and the way individual and communal mediation of the scriptures wounds them. Reading scripture is, at times, a struggle.

I intend to highlight the virtues and capacities necessary to live that struggle well and, by the Spirit's grace, be formed well by scripture.

A number of methodological developments feed into my approach here, which I summarize as *attention to the particular wounds of people living on the margins*. This has three aspects: particularity, wounds, and margins. First, I am guided to the importance of particularity, and therefore biography, by Alastair MacIntyre and James McClendon. MacIntyre ends his *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity* with four short biographies of individuals who exemplify the struggle to live and desire well. This is because MacIntyre holds that "all theoretical conclusions in politics and ethics"—the sort he had been developing in the first four-fifths of his text—"can be understand adequately only by attention to the detail of particular cases," for "understanding such conclusions is inseparable from knowing how they find application."[20] In the same spirit James McClendon argues in *Biography as Theology* that reflection on Christian belief must "begin by attending to lived lives."[21] Like all virtuous crafts, living well with scripture is a matter not only of procedure (which we might erroneously believe we can algorithmically describe for all contingencies) but much more the practical wisdom that comes from tracing the paths of exemplars.

The heart of the present work is a description of three such exemplars. I do not valorize these individuals, though aspects of their struggles are exemplary. Each of these three people

---

[20] Alastair MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reason, and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 243.

[21] "The only relevant critical examination of Christian belief may be one that begins by attending to lived lives. Theology must be at least biography. If by attending to those lives, we find ways of reforming our own theologies, making them more true, more faithful to our ancient vision, more adequate to the age now being born, then we will be justified in that arduous inquiry." James McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, (Eugene Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1974) 22. Willie Jennings' biographical approach in *The Christian Imagination* also informs my method, although I am intentionally not providing the kind of continuous intellectual history via my cases, as Jennings does.

have failings. In a sense, those failing are the point, or part of the point. These individuals embody interpretations with their lives. In so doing they display the profound difficulty humans can face as they seek to live their lives by the rhythms of scripture as well as the healing they find as they do so.

This focus on specific people has a Christological rationale as well. As John Boswell puts it, drawing on the prologue to the gospel of John, "a life can be an argument; being can be a reason," for "Christ was God's unanswerable argument."[22] Maximus the Confessor held that each created thing is a *logos* contained within Christ, the one *Logos* of God (something I will return to in my first chapter). If the goal of Christian reading is conformity to Christ the *Logos*, then the depth of such reading can best be captured by examining the textures of a life. My hope in attending to these individuals is to render clearer the role of scripture in shaping moral agents under circumstances of suffering, and thus provide broader insight into the role of scripture in Christian moral formation. Through my close attention to these three cases I will trace the way textual meaning is neither entirely stable nor endlessly plastic according to context, but rather something that is embodied within the limits of a life.

Second, this project begins, as Mary McClintock Fulkerson has put it, "at the scene of a wound."[23] I take it that at least one task of theology is to begin from places of contemporary and historical pain. This aspect of my approach is heavily informed by what Peter Ochs has called "pragmatic historiography"—the conviction that part of the scholar's vocation is to trace the suffering of the communities to which they attend. I am prompted, as Ochs puts it, to "help repair

---

[22] John Boswell, "Logos and Biography," in Eugene Rogers, *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 359.
[23] Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14.

the conditions of communal suffering that ultimately stimulate [my] inquiry."[24] In the case of the present study, I attend to three separate wounds specific to each of my cases, and trace the possibilities of endurance and healing within each. The overarching difficulty I trace, in doing so, is the relationship between scripture and historical harms. Beginning with my first two chapters, this focus on wounds is rooted Christologically; human wounds may participate in the wounds of Christ.

Third, my attention to wounds is focused on the margins. The following cases explore the lives of individuals who in one way or another have been marginal to contemporary Western theological reflection. This project is thus intended to participate in a "ressourcement from the margins." This phrase has been used by Latinx theologians to describe how attending to voices from the periphery of Christian life can be a mode of renewal for the church.[25]

In light of these criteria, the three cases I have chosen are the sixteenth-century Anabaptist martyr Anna Jansz, the nineteenth-century emancipation preacher John Jea, and the contemporary Palestinian Melkite Archbishop Elias Chacour. Through Anna Jansz I will focus on scripture as it seems to both participate in and then condemn failed movements for apocalyptic transformation; in John Jea, scripture wounds through its apparent support for his enslavement; in Chacour's case, scripture seems to warrant Palestinian displacement. As will become clear, I have also chosen these three because each intersects with my own life. As a Mennonite, the burdens and blessings of Anna Jansz's life are my own. As a white resident of North Carolina, the

---

[24] Peter Ochs, "Talmudic Scholarship as Textual Reasoning: Halivni's Pragmatic Historiography," in ed. Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene, *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and the Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 138.

[25] For Roberto Goizueta, such a renewal is Christologically oriented, it constitutes "a retrieval of the wounded yet glorified body of Christ as the locus of theology." *Christ our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2009), 98.

legacies of the racial capitalism that John Jea resisted provide the backdrop for contemporary political and ethical struggles. Living for three years in northern Iraq introduced me to the unique challenges and possibilities of Middle Eastern Christian identity that define Chacour's story.

By attending to the details of the lives of Jansz, Jea, and Chacour, I hope to describe how suffering interpreters are formed and malformed by their reading and thereby surface constructive suggestions for contemporary Christian reading practices so that Christians might read more charitably, hopefully, and faithfully. Christians are both wounded and healed in their reading of scripture. I locate both aspects—the wounding and the healing—in the embodiment of scripture in individual and social practices. Hermeneutics is finally inseparable from ethics and politics.

Chapter summaries

In preparation for the three case studies, my first two chapters lay out a provisional account of the wounds of scripture, scripture's readers, and Christ. Via Origen of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor, Augustine of Hippo, and Karl Barth, my first chapter traces the notion of scriptural *aporia*, reading these as "wounds," of a sort. My second chapter transposes this more explicitly into a Christological and ethical key by asking how Christ's wounds may be source of healing even as we may misuse them. I continue with an account of language and mediation that locates the "wounds" of scripture in its entanglement with a community's suffering and its embodied practices of interpretation. I conclude this second chapter by describing reading amid wounds as a kind of compassionate tending, thereby placing the development of virtue and practical wisdom at the heart of healing the wounds to which each of my case studies attend.

In my third chapter I wrestle with scriptural apocalypticism through my narration of the life of Anna Jansz, an apocalyptic Anabaptist hymnodist and martyr executed in Rotterdam in

1539. I read Jansz's life as a paradigm case of what I call "the wound of failure." By this I mean the sense of loss that comes when communities or individuals feel that scripture has made promises to them that have not come to be. Grappling with this sense of failure and judgment is a recurring theme in biblical literature itself, from lamentations about Israel's sin and divine judgment in Judges, through the periods of exile, and in apocalyptic literature like Esdras and Revelation. It is Jansz's use of apocalyptic literature—itself arising from contexts of suffering and failure—that I will observe most closely in this chapter. What enables her to endure setbacks patiently? How does scripture form her even as it seems to declare her a failure?

My fourth chapter deals with a more obvious wound: scripture's entanglement with slavery in the modern Atlantic world. In this chapter I read the life, context, and writings of John Jea. Jea was enslaved in West Africa in the 1770s and brought to New York before securing his emancipation and traversing the Atlantic as an itinerant preacher. For Jea, as in slave narratives more broadly, the suffering of bondage was exacerbated by the words of scripture in the mouth of the enslaver, who seemed to find it easy to use the Bible as a moral aid to his domination. The wound in scripture which Jea's narrative reveals is its accommodation with slavery, from Levitical regulation of the practice to the New Testament *Haustafeln*. What does it mean that scripture entangled with slavery in this way, and how does Jea read well despite it?

My fifth chapter continues to explore oppression apparently sanctioned by the Bible through an account of the life of Elias Chacour. Born in 1939 in the Palestinian village of Kfar Bir'im, Israeli forces displaced Chacour in 1948. But the suffering of displacement has been exacerbated by Israeli and Christian Zionist uses of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible to bless the conquests that dislocated Chacour and hundreds of thousands of other Palestinians. In this chapter I linger with the way this sense of alienation from scripture forces a reckoning with divinely

mandated conquest in scripture, even if these are read figurally or contextually. What does it mean for Chacour to live well with scriptural accounts of election when these texts are used to compel his acquiescence in his own displacement?

In my sixth and final chapter, I set these three cases within a broader context. First I connect the issues raised in my case studies with broader debates within non-confessional settings about whether and how to go on reading morally tarnished literature. Then I set these cases within a larger typology of ways in which scripture's readers may be "wounded" in their reading. I conclude by returning to the themes of participation and embodiment in reading.

Thesis

The present work is both for those who believe the Bible is straightforward and unproblematic and for those who believe it is hopelessly beyond liberative use. Scripture truly wounds and may truly, by the Spirit, aid healing. In each of the cases that follow I acknowledge the real harm and pain scripture has occasioned in human communities. I also describe how Jansz, Jea, and Chacour find fruitful re-readings by abiding with those places of hurt. In so doing I seek to recenter debates about hermeneutics and moral formation neither in the text itself nor in the reader, but in the complex matrix of social and historical mediation of scripture within which individuals and communities exercise agency. I conclude that Christians receive scripture not merely from the pages of a book, but from the shape of each other's lives.

Finally, I have invoked the word "tending" several times. The word "tend" connotes two broad families of meaning, both of which are essential to my thesis. It is the active verb in my title and its range captures the variety of practical responses my case studies will exemplify, so here I offer some reflections on my use of the word.

First, to "tend" is to lavish attention, to recognize and respond to needs, or to cultivate. I tend to my child's scrapes when her joy outpaces her dexterity. My father tends to his peach trees, pruning branches and thinning out the excess fruit for a better harvest. God tends the faithful like a flock of sheep. Such tending may require a fitting forcefulness, as with the irritation of an antiseptic, pruning clippers, or the shepherd's staff. In my fifth chapter, Elias Chacour will describe the Spirit's painful tending as a "taming hand." Threatening similar pain, in *Gone With the Wind* Melanie Hamilton declares to the heroine Scarlett O'Hara after she fails to act as a widow should, that "if anybody dares say one little word about you, I'll tend to them."[26] To tend well is to act in truthful and loving accordance with another's deepest needs and nature. Of course, we also tend to things and people poorly, as Scarlett and Rhett do so often in *Gone With the Wind.* It is in all these senses and more that Jansz, Jea, and Chacour tend to scripture through the course of their lives. Sometimes they tend to it like a master, sometimes like a garden, and sometimes like a wound.

The second family of connotations attached to "tending" concerns habit, nature, and movement. My car, whose steering requires adjustment, tends slightly to the left. I tend to avoid conflict, often to my detriment. Adam Smith wrote that in his day "capital…tended and inclined, if I may say so, towards the East India trade."[27] To say that a person or a community tends to act in a certain way is to describe some piece of the whole constellation of habitual virtues and vices that define its development over time. Tending of this sort is essential to my argument as well. The graced and fallen virtues, practices, and collective systemic realities of Christian

---

[26] Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (New York: Warner Books, 1936), 121.
[27] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes the Wealth of Nations* (London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776), 4.7.3.

communities—all our beautiful and horrible *tendencies*—mediate scripture from one generation to the next.

In this second sense of the word, Christians *tend* to pass scripture on to each other in ways that both bless and harm. According to the first sense of the word—fitting care—Christians may *tend* to what they receive. One way to see this whole process of ongoing individual and collective formation and malformation with scripture is to look closely at the practical wisdom displayed by people as they read scripture amid suffering. What does it mean to tend to scripture well when it wounds? To know that, we must attend to particular lives.

Chapter 1

The Wounded Word: Scripture and Incarnation

> *He said to me, 'Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.' Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey*.
>
> – Ezekiel 3:3

> *Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?*
>
> – Jeremiah 23:29

> *The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow.*
>
> –Hebrews 4:12a

By the Spirit, scripture both comforts sinners and wounds sin. Like honey, scripture soothes and satisfies souls. Like fire, a hammer, or a sword, it also consumes, breaks, and severs pride, convicting humans. But scripture wounds in other ways too. A product of human authors, scripture is bound up with the reality of human histories. A tool in the hands of human preachers, scripture is used for human purposes, some of them evil. Scripture truly wounds sin, but it may also wound souls. These first two chapters seek to understand Scripture's capacity to wound. The following three chapters seek to understand human responses to those wounds.

In this first chapter I unfold this thesis: Scripture, like the resurrected Christ, bears wounds that heal. I develop this thesis first by noting the difficulties two patristic authors and one modern author—Origen, Maximus, and Barth—encountered in scripture and the way they responded to these difficulties by tracing analogies between Christ and scripture. Scripture may be understood on analogy with the two natures of Christ not in an abstract mode of relation, but because scripture and its readers participate in the incarnation of the Word. In a sustained echo of

the Word become flesh, the fully human words of scripture come to witness divinely to the purposes of God in history and draw human readers into the same mode of witness. If scripture witnesses to Christ in this way, I argue, it cannot escape witnessing to his wounds as well, and this makes sense of its capacity to act not only as a just judge, but a tool turned painfully to human ends. When Christian scripture wounds its readers in this way, the Spirit may intervene to tend these wounds so that healing flows from them. In the third, fourth, and fifth chapters we will see how heavy a task this is. Yet its very burdens may conform readers to Christ.

1.1 The Difficulty of Scripture and the Humanity of Christ: Patristic Accounts

Modern Christians are not the first to find scripture difficult. Before his conversion, the fourth-century bishop Augustine of Hippo had both desired and resisted the Christian life. One of the difficulties that drove him to "despair" was his "belief that the law and the prophets could not be defended."[28] The Bible "seemed to me unworthy in comparison with the dignity of Cicero."[29] It was finally the deft figural preaching of Ambrose of Milan that removed these stumbling blocks. "By taking them literally" Augustine "had found them to kill."[30] Now, however, the stories of the Old Testament became a fertile field of signs in his own preaching and writing. Later in *On Christian Doctrine* he acknowledged the persistence of such difficulties and prescribed allegory as their solution. "Those things which seem almost shameful to the inexperienced, whether simply spoken or actually performed either by the person of God or by

[28] Augustine, *Confessions*, 5. 14. 24. Translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
[29] Augustine, *Confessions*, 3. 5. 9.
[30] Ibid., 5.14. 24.

men whose sanctity is commended to us, are all figurative."[31] For Augustine, scripture contains things that are at first glance shameful and not at all commendable. Similarly, for the thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas, the "truth of faith is contained in Holy Writ diffusely, under various modes of expression, and sometimes obscurely," and for him too this justifies allegorical reading.[32] Even the later Protestant doctrine of the perspicuity of scripture affirms such obscurity. While maintaining scripture's clarity in essentials, the 1646 Reformed *Westminster Confession of Faith*, for example, allows that "all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves."[33] From the earliest days of the faith through today, then, Christians have found portions of scripture obscure, horrifying, or confusing. The ears of faith may anticipate a final harmony in scripture's words, but before the eschaton its music sometimes sounds discordant.

That is a problem. How can scripture truly reveal the way of God with humanity, given its difficulties? In this first section I explore a perennial strategy in response to this difficulty: speaking of scripture as body and spirit. I describe how this relates to affirmations of Christ's humanity and divinity, and I argue that the language of wounds befits Christians' sense of scripture's difficulties.

First, a clarification: in the accounts I survey, scripture does not function as an abstract analogue to Christ, with two natures that correspond precisely to his. John Webster has argued against the hypostatic union as a static metaphor for scripture. He suggests that doing so imperils Christology by making "'incarnation' a general principle or characteristic of divine action."[34] Further, he argues, it would threaten to divinize scripture "by claiming some sort of ontological

---

[31] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,* 3. 18. Translated by D. W. Robertson, Jr., (Prentice Hall, NJ: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1958), 90.
[32] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* II-II, q. 1, a. 8, ad. 1.
[33] *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. Translated by John Macpherson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark) 1, 7.
[34] John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 22-23.

identity between the biblical texts and the self-communication of God."[35] Webster is not alone in his concerns about the analogy between Christ and scripture. For example, Lewis Ayres and Stephen Fowl have argued that wooden conceptions of scripture's "divinity" and "humanity" have at times led to an overemphasis on historical critical approaches as a procedure through which scripture's "divinity" can be glimpsed through the husk of its merely human history.[36] The fact that critics like Webster, Fowl, and Ayres see *opposite* dangers—inappropriate divinization and humanization—suggests to me that construing scripture on the model of the hypostatic union may in fact be a mean between extremes.

In what follows I explore this analogy, therefore, with one essential caveat: at its best, talk of scripture's humanity and divinity indicates not a static parallel relation, but a mode of participation. Scripture bears a loose and dynamic analogy to Christ not because it adheres to an underlying general principle, but because the Word takes scripture up as part of the same act by which the Word becomes flesh. Scripture participates in the single, encompassing act of divine revelation in the Word's assumption of flesh and blood. In the words of the Second Vatican Council's reformulation of the doctrine of revelation, "the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men."[37]

---

[35] Ibid., He continues, "Over against this, it has to be asserted that no divine nature or properties are to be predicated of Scripture; its substance is hat of a creaturely reality…and its relation to God is instrumental. In the case of the Bible, there can be no question of 'a union of divine and human factors,' but only of 'the mystery of the human words *as* God's Word,' 23.

[36] Lewis Ayres and Stephen Fowl, "(Mis)Reading the Face of God: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 513-528.

[37] Second Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei verbum,"* November 18, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0141/_INDEX.HTM, chapter 3.

In what follows, Origen of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor, and other patristic figures establish the contours of this relation, clarifying through their use of body-spirit language what it might mean to think of scripture, like Christ, as a *wounded* body. I turn then to Karl Barth, whose language of witness enables us to see more clearly how humans participate in this act of sometimes difficult revelation. In turning to these eclectic figures I do not chart a continuous intellectual history. Rather, I sample a few voices from disparate corners of the Christian tradition in order to establish a shared sense of what it has meant to grapple with scripture's humanity, and why it might make sense to invoke the language of wounds.

1.1.1 Origen on scriptural aporia and spiritual transformation

Living in the Greek-speaking Mediterranean of late antiquity, Origen of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor exemplify a tradition that allows Christians to name scripture as a body that makes Christ present. For Origen, the form of scripture corresponds to the form of the human. In *On First Principles* he states that just as a human consists of "body, soul and spirit, so also does the holy scripture."[38] For Origen, scripture's body is its literal sense, while its soul and spirit are its spiritual senses. The last two are not distinguished by specific characteristics (as in the later medieval distinctions between allegory, tropology, and anagogy), but they indicate the individual's spiritual progress.

> Each one must therefore portray the meaning of the sacred writings in a threefold way upon one's own soul, so that the simple may be edified by what we call the body of the scriptures….while those who have begun to make a little progress and are able to perceive something more than that may be edified by the soul of scripture; and those who are perfect….may be edified by [the] spiritual law.[39]

---

[38] Origen of Alexandria, trans G.W. Butterworth, *On First Principles* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2013), 4.2.4.
[39] Ibid.

Reading these distinctions charitably, here we see not primarily a division between kinds of people—some more bodily than others—but rather the spiritual transformation of a single person, which includes and does not leave behind the body and its sense. The "simple" one is no other than one's self. To read well, the entire three-fold human nature must encounter the entire three-fold nature of scripture.

This structure in which scripture's literal meaning reveals (and simultaneously veils) its spiritual truth parallels Origen's account of the identity of Christ, in which Christ's humanity hides his divinity. "Just as there [in Christ] it was covered with the veil of the flesh, so here with the veil of the letter, so that indeed the letter is seen as flesh but the spiritual sense hiding within is perceived as divinity."[40]

Because the spiritual senses are "hidden" within the literal senses, disruptions of the literal sense halt the reader so that they can see not just the path before them, but the spiritual sky above. Examples of such disruptions—*aporia* or stumbling blocks—include, for example, the paradoxical order of creation in Genesis 1, fantastical creatures in the law, and elements of the Gospels as well, such as Jesus enjoining his listeners to tear out their right eye if it occasions sin (Matt. 5:29; 18:9).[41] In each case, something in the text irritates Origen's common sense. By pausing in response to that irritation instead of rushing past it, he notices depths he would have missed. Through such cases God leads readers "on to search for a truth deeper down" so that that

---

[40] Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* I, translated by Gary Wayne Barkley (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1990), 29. In his *Scholia on Matthew*, Origen again suggests that the writtenness of scripture corresponds to Christ's humanity. "In the same way that the spoken word is by nature impalpable and invisible, but when it is written in a book, and acquires a body, as it were, then it is both seen and touched, so too the fleshless and incorporeal Word of God, who according to His divinity is neither seen nor written, but because He was incarnate, can be both seen and written." Origen, *Scholia on Matthew* (PG 17:289), quoted in Maximos Constas, "Intoduction," *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture,"* 39.

[41] Origen, *On First Principles,* 4.3.

they "discover in the scriptures which we believe to be inspired by God a meaning worthy of God."[42] Stumbling blocks in this sense are like speed bumps, slowing readers so that they notice more. If the bodily senses of scripture had always been in accord with its spiritual senses, human readers would "not have believed that there was anything else buried within them beyond what was indicated at a first glance."[43]

Why do the literal senses need disrupting in the first place? After all, Origen suggests that, as the Holy Spirit superintended the process of writing, canonizing, and receiving of the scripture, the Spirit also layered the spiritual senses *without* discord. "Whenever he found that things which had been done in history could be harmonized with the spiritual meaning, he composed in a single narrative a texture comprising both kinds of meaning"—spiritual and bodily.[44] But in the wake of the fall, discordant notes of human history clash with divine purpose—and this human history is the stuff from which God made scripture. "Wherever the record of deeds that had been done could not be made to correspond with the sequence of the spiritual truths, he inserted occasionally some deeds of a less probable character or which could not have happened at all."[45] Human history cannot always bear the weight of divine truth unaided. Like a carpenter who accentuates a knot in the wood rather than removing it and covering it over, the Holy Spirit has guided the creation and reception of scripture so that its very pockmarks can occasion further divine revelation, rather than stumbling.

---

[42] Ibid., 4.2. Origen here is the beginning of a tradition that will extend to the West as well. Augustine in *On Christian Doctrine* will declare much the same thing, holding that "many and varied obscurities and ambiguities deceive those who read casually…I do not doubt that this situation was provided by God to conquer pride at work and to combat disdain in our minds, to which those things which are easily discovered seem frequently to become worthless." II/6.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid..
[45] Ibid.

While Origen's broader account of the bodily and spiritual senses of scripture parallels his Christology, his notion of "stumbling blocks," in contrast, resembles the way he speaks of divine pedagogy, judgment, and the suffering that arises from sin. Like many others, Origen argues that sin creates its own punishment. "Just as in the body an abundance of…food that disagrees with us…gives rise to fevers…so when the soul has gathered within itself a multitude of evil deeds…the whole mass of evil boils up into punishment and is kindled into penalties."[46] In Origen's careful language, God "makes use of" this process for our healing.[47]

Though Origen does not make this parallel explicit, a shared logic unites human persons suffering under the weight of sin and the human words that become divine scripture. Like the person who undergoes ascetic transformation by suffering the consequences of their own sin, scripture contains ruptures that bring God's grace close. The stumbling blocks in scripture arise because of human sin but can provoke transformation. These dynamics share an implicit logic because they are, for Origen, part of one continuous process of divine care. The wounds in the text, so to speak, may enact the patient redemption of God in the wounded human who reads by the Spirit.

1.1.2 Maximus on scriptural aporia and participation

With and somewhat beyond Origen then, we may speak of scripture as a wounded body through which God transforms its readers. With the seventh-century Byzantine theologian Maximus the Confessor we can speak more explicitly of that body as part of Christ's body, insofar as scripture participates in the single, cosmic dynamic of the incarnation. For Maximus, as

---

[46] *On First Principles* 2.10.
[47] Ibid., 2.10.6.

for much of later Christian tradition, scripture and creation are the two "books" through whom the Word incarnate in Jesus Christ becomes manifest to us. For the Confessor, both the "natural law" of created things and the "written law" of the words, symbols, and ideas of scripture manifest Christ. For its part, the natural world of creation is like a book. "For letters and syllables it has physical bodies… and it is from these that the Word, who has wisely inscribed them and is Himself ineffably inscribed within them, is rendered legible when He is read by us."[48] If created things are like a book, "the written law, is itself like another world."[49] Christ transforms his followers as they meet him in these two worlds.

How should we understand the relationship between the specific, definitive incarnation of the Word in Jesus and his manifestation in scripture and creation? Jesus is the supreme and complete incarnation of the Word, and we glimpse that incarnation in scripture. "For our sake," Maximus says, the Word "became like us and came to us through the body, and likewise grew thick in syllables and letters."[50] But his incarnation does not happen in isolation from creation; it completes the Word in all creation. Maximus suggests that Christ, the incarnate *Logos*, "from all eternity…contained within himself the preexisting *logoi* of created beings."[51] Stars, rocks, humans, and bacteria all participate in Christ "in a manner appropriate and proportionate to the being of each."[52] To be, and to be well is to find oneself drawn closer to the Christ who includes all being within himself. We are, for Maximus, little *logoi* within the one *Logos.* "For the *Logos* of God (who is God) wills always and in all things to accomplish the mystery of his

---

[48] Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, translated by Nicholas Constas, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 10:30. (DOML 1:195).
[49] Maximus, *Ambiguum* 10:30. (DOML 1:195-7).
[50] Ibid, *Ambiguum* 10:32 (DOML 1:199).
[51] Ibid, *Ambiguum* 7:16 (DOML 1:96).
[52] Ibid, *Ambiguum* 7:16 (DOML 1:97).

embodiment."[53] Subsequent chapters will take up this notion and apply it to biography. Here, my concern is scripture itself.

The Bible plays a special role in this cosmic embodiment of Christ. Because scripture accommodates our fallen state, it contains stumbling blocks, aporia that arise from some combination of divine action and human limits but are ordered by God beyond those human limits. Like Origen, Maximus views the aporia in scripture (and in the created world) as occasions for transformation. While Maximus does not record personal difficulties with scripture as Augustine does, his method focuses on points of confusion in scripture or tradition and shows how each stumbling block leads readers to a fuller picture of the Word.[54]

In reflections on the book of Jonah, for example, Maximus responds to a monk who writes to him wondering why God changed: decreeing the destruction of Nineveh but failing to carry it out. "How is God being truthful?" Maximus muses, sharing the monk's concern.[55] But, he replies, "God in truth both destroys and saves the same city: the former, by making it desist from its error; the latter, by bringing about its acquisition of true knowledge."[56] This is the pattern of every human's life in Christ, Maximus continues: God both destroys the evil within a person and redeems their true self. Maximus thus develops Origen's concept of scripture as a body within a fuller account of the Word's embodiment in all things (redressing Origen's tendency to escape

---

[53] Ibid, *Ambiguum* 7:22 (DOML 1:107).
[54] For more on this aspect of Maximus' method, see Paul Blowers' *Exegesis and Spiritual Pedagogy in the Quaestiones ad Thalassios of Maximus the Confessor* (Ann Arbor, MI: Dissertation Information Service, 1989).
[55] Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios.* trans. Maximos Constas (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 509. This chapter is also excerpted in the Popular Patristics Series' anthology of Maximus, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ* trans. Paul Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 2003) 145-171.
[56] Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture*, 509.

from the material). For Maximus, scripture's difficulties slow down its readers so that they can embody the same transformation scripture records.

The notion that creation and scripture are "two books" flourished in the West and in later medieval tradition as well. The anti-gnostic writing of Irenaeus' anti-gnostic highlighted and expanded this theme, insisting that the created world—and humanity in particular—was truly a work of God and that God's love may be known through those works.[57] For Augustine, the created order, read rightly, describes its Creator. "God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead, He set before your eyes the things that He had made!"[58] John Chrysostom describes the heavens as revelations of divine love for the unlettered poor.[59] Turning to my own tradition for a moment, the sixteenth-century Anabaptist notion of the "gospel of all creatures" held that suffering animals participated in Christ's sacrificial love.[60]

In the mystical theology of the twelfth-century Hugh of St. Victor, scripture is one aspect of the single divine outpouring of love given shape by the Word.[61] "The whole Divine Scripture is one Book," he states, "and that one Book is Christ, for the whole Divine Scripture speaks of

---

[57] Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 4.20.1 Translated by Dominic Unger and John Dillon, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992).
[58] *Sermon* 126.6 in the Angelo Mai collection, *Miscellanea Augustiniana* 1:355-68. Quoted in Vernon Bourke, *The Essential Augustine* (Indianapolis: Hackett, Publishing, 1974), 123.
[59] "Upon this volume the unlearned, as well as the wise man, shall be able to look, and wherever any one may chance to come, there looking upwards towards the heavens, he will receive a sufficient lesson from the view of them" John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Statutes.* 9.5.
[60] Though distinctively Anabaptist, the doctrine is just as clearly a result of the influence of earlier Rhineland mysticism. See Hans Hut, *On the Mystery of Baptism,* in *The Radical Reformation,* ed. and trans. Michael Baylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 156. For the most interesting contemporary Anabaptist writing on the doctrine, see Isaac Villegas, "Wounded Life," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 39, no 1 (Winter 2021).
[61] "God is become everything to you, and God has made everything for you. He has made the dwelling, and is become your refuge….It was for this, with a view to this, on account of this, that the whole of scripture was made. For this, the Word was made flesh, God was made humble, man was made sublime. If you have this, then you have everything." Hugh of St. Victor, *Noah's Ark* I.6, in *Hugh of Saint-Victor: Selected Spiritual Writings*, trans. Religious of C. S. M. V. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1962), 51.

Christ and is fulfilled in Christ."[62] For a modern reader used to opening the Bible as a single bound volume, the assertion that scripture is "one Book" may seem pedantic, but for premoderns encountering scripture materially as a collection of distinct volumes, the observation would be weightier. These mystical reflections found further expression a century later at the close of Dante's *Paradiso* when Dante looks on the Godhead and sees "bound with love in one volume, what through the universe becomes unsewn quires."[63]

Finally, in addition to this tradition of the "two books," I wish to briefly highlight Augustine's imaginative construal of scripture as a "firmament" in the thirteenth chapter of the *Confessions.* Augustine's analogy is similar to what we see in Maximus' account of scripture as another world, and fits the broader theme of intermingling images of the cosmos and written texts. However, he uses this metaphor to make a distinct point about the nature, origins, and limits of scripture. Scripture is, Augustine writes, a kind of sky: "Who but you, oh God, did make for us a solid firmament of authority over us in your divine scripture?"[64] While that sky is for human healing, it has come about as a result of sin and death. Augustine reaches for a different analogy to make this point (one natural to make in the age of vellum). Drawing on the language of Psalm 103 he suggests that this firmament is "like a skin," and indeed like the skins worn by Adam and Eve after their expulsion from Eden. "You clothed human beings with skins when by sin they became mortal. So you have stretched out the firmament of your book 'like a skin,' that is, your words which are not mutually discordant and which you have placed over us by the ministry of mortal men."[65] For Augustine, God accommodates the fall of humanity by providing scripture,

---

[62] Hugh of St. Victor, *Noah's Ark* II.11 in *Hugh of Saint-Victor: Selected Spiritual Writings, 86.*
[63] Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso,* 33:85. Translated by Robert Durling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 665.
[64] Augustine, *Confessions,* 13. 15. 16. Translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 282.
[65] Augustine, *Confessions,* 13. 15. 16.

through which, in our fallen state, we will be able to look up and gaze upon a firmament that will elevate our thoughts. Angels do not need this firmament. They live above this heaven of scripture and so can look upon God directly. "For you yourself are a book to them…Now your word appears to us…through the mirror of heaven, not as it really is" but in the life to come, "we shall see him as he is."[66]

For Augustine there is no hint that this firmament of scripture is imperfect. It is a good gift of God whose words are "not mutually discordant." It is a gift, however, that God miraculously brings out of the workings of death. Augustine insists several times that the "death of the mortal authors through whom you provided it for us" is the act by which scripture is "stretched out over everything." Just as God gave animal skins to Adam and Eve, God makes use of the death humans brought about, turning it wonderfully toward good. Now Christians may read in scripture a vision of Christ, whose face they will one day see without mirror or likeness. As Michael Cameron puts it, scripture participates in a "vast divine strategy of rhetorical accommodation."[67] Elsewhere Augustine describes this accommodation in ways strikingly like Maximus. "To meet our weakness [Christ] descended to the discrete sounds we use, for he also descended to take to himself the weakness of our human body."[68] The gracious gift of scripture comes, for Augustine, as an accommodation to human fallenness and it makes use of that very fallenness—of which mortality is a sign—to establish its authority.

---

[66] Ibid., 13. 15. 18.
[67] Michael Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine's Early Figurative Exegesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 39.
[68] Quoted in Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere*, 40. *En. Ps*. 103.4.1 (CCL 40:1521); trans. Boulding, WSA III/19:167. As Cameron puts it, "his thoughts on the humanity of Christ correlates with how he read Scripture figuratively," 98.

1.2 The Difficulty of Scripture and the Humanity of Christ: Karl Barth

The divinity of scripture is made manifest not despite its human frailty, but in and through it. Karl Barth's modern account of scripture as a divine and human witness clarifies the themes of the previous section. This section turns now to volume I/2 of his *Church Dogmatics.* There he describes scripture as the indispensable witness to the Word of God.[69]

1.2.1 Karl Barth and scripture as a human-divine witness

Barth draws out an explicit analogy between Christ's human and divine natures and the frailty and holiness of scripture. His account, I will argue, shares Maximus' participatory logic, but with a distinctive dialectical element. "Holy Scripture," he states, "is like the unity of God and man in Jesus Christ. It is neither divine only nor human only. Nor is it a mixture of the two nor a *tertium quid* between them. But in its own way and degree it is very God and very man."[70] Scripture is not Christ.[71] Rather, it becomes a witness of Christ for us in the event of revelation, brought about by the Spirit.[72] It is, however, entirely like Christ insofar as we cannot speak adequately of what scripture is unless we speak of its humanity and its divinity—and speak of its humanity and divinity as occurring without mixture and yet without division. "There is no point

---

[69] His thesis for this section is "The Word of God is God himself in Holy Scripture. For God once spoke as Lord to Moses and the prophets, to the Evangelists and apostles. And now through their written word He speaks as the same Lord to His Church. Scripture is holy and the Word of God, because by the Holy Spirit it became and will become to the Church a witness of divine revelation." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2. Translated by G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1956), 457.
[70] Karl Barth, *CD* I/2, 501.
[71] "The presence of the Word of God itself, the real and present speaking and hearing of it, is not identical with the existence of the book as such." Ibid., 530.
[72] "We distinguish the Bible as such from revelation. A witness is not absolutely identical with that to which it witnesses.…In the Bible we meet with human words written in human speech, and in these words, and therefore by means of them, we hear of the lordship of the triune God." Ibid., 463.

in ignoring the writtenness of Holy Writ for the sake of its holiness, its humanity for the sake of its divinity. We must not ignore it any more than we do the humanity of Jesus Christ himself. …it is here or nowhere that we shall find its divinity."[73] Scripture's status as indispensable and reliable *witness* to Christ is simultaneously that which enables us to truly call it "the Word of God" and that which marks it off as separate and other than Christ, the true Word. Scripture is not merely like Christ; scripture makes Christ present. It does so in a way that resembles the way the Son makes the Father present. Inspired by Barth, Hans Frei writes that the Son

> points away from himself to God. But the mysterious reversal is that the witness who points away from himself is the one who is witnessed to by the very God and the very Spirit to whom he witnesses. By analogy the feeble, often naïve and simple word of written scripture—and even its usually pathetic, clumsy interpretation in the spoken word—becomes a true witness, yet more than a witness.…The witness of scripture to God is sure, not of itself, but because the witness of God to scripture is faithful and constant.[74]

The Spirit draws creation into the love between the Son who witnesses to the Father and the Father who sends the Son. Scripture is a primary means by which the Spirit extends this embrace to humanity. Scripture echoes the Son's revelation of the Father and so by the Spirit's grace it becomes for us the Word of God.

In Barth's account of this dynamic, there is an "indirect identity" between Christ and scripture. "We have to speak about an indirect *identity*" in order to "safeguard ourselves" from the idea that to read scripture is "to penetrate past the biblical texts to the facts which lie behind the texts."[75] But that identity is indirect, which cautions us against raising the Bible to a status beside Christ. The humanity of scripture is unlike the humanity of Jesus. It

---

[73] Ibid., 463.
[74] Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 194.
[75] Ibid., 492. Italics original.

does not "independently reveal" God, nor is it "taken up into the glory of God." Scripture's humanity is the humanity of the prophets and the apostles. It is the humanity of those who, to paraphrase the prologue to John, came as a witness to testify to the light though they were not themselves the light. By the Spirit's grace in hearts and lives, they testify still. Scripture, in Barth's words, "attests" to the "revelation which takes place in the humanity of Jesus Christ."[76]

This notion of an indirect identity has brought us already to the second aspect of Barth's doctrine of scripture that I wish to highlight: this divine-human unity of scripture requires an acknowledgement that scripture witnesses to the Word of God in its frailty and even its fallibility. On Christological grounds it would not do, for Barth, to describe scripture's divinity and humanity and then go on to attempt a sort of partitive exegesis, arguing that in this passage we see scripture's divine witness, while in that passage we see its human nature. It is not that, for example, the imprecatory psalms reveal scripture's humanity, while psalms of enthronement and blessing display its divinity. "Always in the Bible as in all other human words we shall meet both."[77] As the French Catholic phenomenologist Jean-Louis Chrétien put it, "the holy scriptures are…at once divine: not: divine…here and human there, and in particular not divine wherever it is convenient for me and human where it isn't."[78] However much I desire to find in scripture a model of inter-ethnic inclusion, I cannot read the story of the foreigner Ruth's marriage into Israel as divine words and Ezra's and Nehemiah's condemnations of mixed marriage as human words; both are both, even if I cannot see how. This is not to say that both passages ought to have the

---

[76] Ibid., 500.
[77] Ibid., 531.
[78] Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Under the Gaze of the Bible,* trans. John Marson Dunaway (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 6.

same moral force. One may read Ezra's prohibitions allegorically, or as no longer binding for any number of reasons. But, to call the Bible scripture is to hold that the Spirit may yet speak through all its words, even the disagreeable ones. Christians do not know in advance how she will do so.

But Barth also rejects doctrines of inspiration that would make the Bible's human writers mere mouthpieces for the Holy Spirit—such would be a kind of Docetism. Instead, in scripture, we meet Christ and we meet human words about Christ always inseparably together. "A genuine, fallible, human word is at this center the Word of God: not in virtue of its own superiority, or its replacement by a Word of God veiled as the word of man…but…in virtue of the privilege that there and now it is taken and used by God Himself, like the water in the Pool of Bethesda."[79] Scripture, in all its human frailty, becomes a witness to the Word of God as it is taken up and used by the Holy Spirit, once again, to make the Word known to humans. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 trace this difficult miracle in three different lives.

Barth's insistence on this unity results in a bold declaration of scripture's "capacity for errors." The humanity of scripture is imperfect, and grasping that imperfection allows sight of its divine perfection. "We know what we say when we call the Bible the Word of God only when we recognize its human imperfection in face of its divine perfection, and its divine perfection in spite of its human imperfection."[80] This "imperfection" consists in real error, Barth argues. Or rather, it consists in its *capacity* for such. "Instead of talking about the 'errors' of the biblical authors in this sphere, if we want to go to the heart of things it is better to speak only about their 'capacity for errors.'"[81] This capacity for human error includes not mere matters of historical fact, but "also

---

[79] Ibid., 508.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Ibid.

extends to its…theological content."[82] This is a bold claim. Again, however, it does not presage an attempt to parcel out the erroneous portions of scripture from the wholly divine. Rather, Barth seeks to affirm, once again, that the infallible Word takes up real human words—and therefore fallible human words—to make God known. "Verbal inspiration does not mean the infallibility of the biblical word in its linguistic, historical, and theological character as a human word. It means that the fallible and faulty human word is as such used by God and has to be received and heard in spite of its human fallibility."[83]

1.2.2 Scripture in Barth's account of dialectical witness

We can grasp Barth's meaning only if we realize what it means for a human error to become a sign of the Word. Katherine Sonderegger, in an essay on Barth's doctrine of scripture, has argued that these reflections early in the *Church Dogmatics* on the fallibility of scripture should be taken seriously but with a proviso. Sonderegger argues that Barth's strong assertion that the errors of scripture become, by divine degree, witnesses to the Word of God could constitute "a form of occasionalism" unless they are accompanied by a detailed account of scripture's reliability.[84] Sonderegger suggests that, while Barth attends to this throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, he provides a specially focused view on this in his account of atonement in *CD* IV/1. There, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ provide the hinge around which all of scripture swings, defining its reliability as a witness to the Word. It is not as if, for example, the Gospels may be in error about Christ's resurrection, but God nonetheless reveals the Word through that error. Scripture, Barth states in III/1, "gives us a reliable basis for our knowledge and

[82] Ibid., 509.
[83] Ibid., 533.
[84] Katherine Sonderegger, "The Doctrine of Inspiration and the Reliability of Scripture," in *Thy Word is Truth: Barth on Scripture*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 23.

confession" in that it "gives us witness to Jesus Christ" who is the "primary and ultimate object of its witness."[85] Scripture witnesses reliably to the Word because it faithfully makes present the Christ we meet in the Gospels. In Sonderegger's terms, the "divine agency" that guarantees scripture's witness in, through, and despite its fallibility "is not a moment, but a whole life, Christ's risen life." Indeed, "Christ himself is the 'coinherence' of word and Word" such that the doctrine of scripture "cannot end now in proper reading, however faithful or attentive or confident; the goal rather is to be sent as were once the first disciples to speak these words about Christ's past because in them, his present Life—astonishing as it is!—abides with us, to chasten and to save."[86]

Sonderegger points us in the direction of a broader insight: the challenge Christians face in discerning the Word in scripture is the challenge of being called by Christ himself. In a long section of *CD* IV/1 titled "The Verdict of the Father" Barth explores the problem of how the events of Christ's life become real for us. As he puts it, "how can that which has happened once, even if it did happen for us, be recognized today as happening for us, seeing it does not happen today?"[87] Here Barth explicitly engages Gotthold Lessing's "ugly, broad ditch." He does not deny the problem of how historically contingent events can have existential import for those who view them at a distance. But he suggests that it is a spiritual crisis rather than a methodological puzzle. Christ has crossed the ditch to our side. The extraordinary gap between the lost accidents of history and divine truth has been bridged, from God's side. The problem, now, is practical: our assent to Christ's offer. The problem is our willingness to accept that Christ can make witnesses

---

[85] Barth, *CD* III/1, 23.
[86] Sonderegger, "The Doctrine of Inspiration," 28.
[87] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 287.

to himself out of the lost accidents of our lives. "The genuineness of Lessing's question cannot be disputed in that it springs from a very genuine need: the need to hide ourselves (like Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden) from Jesus Christ as He makes himself present and mediates Himself to us."[88] The problem, in short, is not a historiographical riddle, but human avoidance.

> As long as we can question and discuss the presence of that once and for all event…so long we are obviously protected against the catastrophe which the knowledge of the content…would mean for us. We do not then have to notice that we are in exactly the same position as Peter in the boat and the women at the empty tomb and the shepherds of Bethlehem.[89]

Barth sometimes construes this as proud denial. Christians refuse to emerge from our comfortable sin and face the challenge of the gospel. But for Barth this failure is as much or more about shame as it is pride. In our inability to believe that Christ is for us, we face, in essence, the dread that Christ cannot dwell within such as us. We fear the "incompatibility of the existence of Jesus Christ with us and us with him, the impossibility of the co-existence of his divine-human actuality and action and our sinfully human being and activity."[90] The answer is simple, if not easy: Christ, rising from the dead, enables sinful lives to become witnesses of his glory. This does not solve the problem of human avoidance, but then again, the conceptual problem was never the true difficulty; the true difficulty was existential. And this same existential problem is what we see in scripture. How can sinful human histories and limited human words become witnesses to the Word? By the same miracle that Jesus Christ becomes real for people today. We are, as Barth says, "in exactly the same position as Peter in the boat and the women at the empty tomb."

---

[88] Ibid., 292.
[89] Ibid., 291-2.
[90] Ibid., 348.

This is true not simply as a matter of reception of Christ as Word, but proclamation as well. "If we consider what men are doing in the Church, ourselves or others, it is only by a crude self-deception that we can come to the conclusion that the Word of God is really being preached there."[91] And yet, this is exactly what Christians must accept on faith. "We have to accept that it is so and allow it to be true…Humanly speaking, it is a stark impossibility which here stares us in the face—that men should speak what God speaks; but it is one which in Jesus Christ is already overcome."[92] Just as in his account of scripture, however, Barth insists that the Word is not preached out of any purely human virtue. Neither is this a miracle in which preached words are erased and replaced with divine words. Rather, the miracle is that Christ reveals himself precisely through the sinful words of Christian proclamation. Another aspect of the miracle must therefore be that Christians come to acknowledge themselves as *sinful* witnesses. For the church to speak the Word of God requires "the realization that in God's light we are shown to be darkness, in God's judgment we are exposed as liars, and that we shall think and speak the truth always against our own selves."[93] Or, as he puts it in his Romans commentary, "If the church desires to be altogether Moses….then it must recognize and ponder the fact that it is Pharaoh."[94]

This notion of negative testimony, witness against oneself, is just how Barth reads scripture—discerning how biblical types witness, despite themselves, to Christ the antitype. Rather than seeking a harmony of different figures of Christ in scripture, Barth sought to show how totally incongruous themes and characters dialectically witnessed to Christ. Indeed, Barth always heightens the contradictions without allowing them to twist apart into separate

---

[91] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 748.
[92] Ibid., 749.
[93] Ibid., 884.
[94]Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933, 1968), 353.

trajectories. He shows instead how the contradictions are preserved, distinctly, in Christ himself. While distinctly Barthian, this approach has patristic precedent in the notion of scripture as a mirror that depicts both negative human qualities and their transformation. As Gregory the Great puts it, in "Sacred Scripture is offered like a kind of mirror to the eyes of the mind…for there we recognize our ugliness and our beauty. There we measure our progress; there we see how far we are from our goal."[95]

Perhaps the best expression of Barth's dialectical exegesis is his remarkable reading of election in "the Elect and the Rejected" in *CD* II/2. He traces sets of elect/rejected dyads beginning in Genesis and culminating with Paul and Judas. He reads all these dyads, rendering each figure more pronounced as either elect or rejected, and then mingles them together. God rejects Saul but also elects him. God chooses David but also rejects him. This is part of the "stumbling block" of election—how is it that the elect are also rejected and the rejected also elect? It is a narration, and a question, that ends in the grave in which two prophets are buried in I Kings 13.[96] Like Maximus and Origen, Barth finds in this stumbling block deeper truth. In these stories Barth narrates the stern faithfulness and tender judgment of God and concludes that all these diverse modes of human existence have their fulfillment in the crucified and risen Christ. Election and rejection have "been actualized in a single person, so that we cannot deny either aspect, or separate them, but can and must understand the one by the other, and see in the whole, i.e., in the one human figure, the kingship of God as it has drawn near."[97] This fulfillment, however, does not solve the puzzle of how election and rejection are related in the Old Testament.

---

[95] Gregory the Great, *Moral Reflections on the Book of Job*, translated by Brian Kerns (Collegeville, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2014), I.II.1., p. 117.
[96] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, 409.
[97] Ibid., 393.

His Christological reading does not unburden the text, but renders the scandal existential rather than merely exegetical. The scandal of election, for Barth, is a summons for readers to acknowledge themselves as rejected and elect along with the biblical figures. The stumbling blocks of scripture, then, are opportunities to become signs of the grace of God just as the broken figures of scripture are signs of that same originating grace. Just as Saul testifies against himself to the electing God, so too the scandals of scripture can be turned against themselves to signs of grace. So too can the lives of scripture's readers.

Now we can see clearly what Barth means by his full-throated defense of scriptural fallibility. Scripture becomes the Word of God as its broken signs are turned toward the risen Christ. It becomes the Word of God insofar as its hearers may be similarly transformed. To believe in the witness of scripture is to believe in the redemption of souls. To believe in the witness of scripture is to believe in the resurrection of the crucified body.

> To the bold postulate, that if their word is to be the word of God they must be inerrant in every word, we oppose the even bolder assertion, that according to the scriptural witness about man, which applies to them too, they can be at fault in any word, and have been at fault in every word, and yet according to the same scriptural witness, being justified and sanctified by grace alone, they have still spoken the word of God in their fallible and erring human word. It is the fact that in the Bible we can take part in this real miracle, the miracle of the grace of God to sinners, and not the idle miracle of human words which were not really human words at all, which is the foundation of the dignity and authority of the Bible.[98]

To read the Bible well, for Barth, is to find human weakness becoming a testament to divine faithfulness, by the same grace that called Saul. It is to see, in lives and in scriptures, the cross transfigured into glory.

Conclusion

---

[98] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 530.

In distinct but complementary ways, Origen, Maximus, and Barth all show how scripture reflects the natures of Christ not in static analogy but as a dynamic process that ultimately finds its source and fulfillment in the resurrection of his crucified body. These figures certainly do not speak with one voice. Where for Origen and Maximus the central motif is spiritual transformation by discerning spiritual truth through and beyond the veil of scripture's sensory images, for Barth those very sensory images are taken up and used by Christ as divine communication. Indeed, Barth's insistence on scripture's humanity is, we might say, an anti-Docetic response to ways of reading scripture that posit a human husk hiding a divine kernel. However, a few commonalities stand out. I highlight three.

First, scripture's human witness to Christ echoes and participates in Christ's human and divine natures. Barth carries forward an explicit parallel with Christ's divine and human natures, but this becomes a mode of human participation in the Word, not an abstract account of scripture's essence. As Maximus puts it, the Word "became like us and came to us through the body, and likewise grew thick in syllables and letters."[99] In the very words of scripture we see the same kind of embodiment that happens, once and for all, in the incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ. Like waves from a pebble dropped in a pond, scripture ripples out from this singular act of the Word, both forward and backward in time. Because the Word becomes flesh in Christ, Christ the Word takes on human words in scripture.

Second, despite these parallels and analogies, scripture is marked off as different, lesser, and subordinate to Christ insofar as it is a witness to Christ. Scripture does not manifest itself. It points toward and reveals Christ, in a way analogous to but distinct from the Son's revealing of

---

[99] Maximus, *Ambiguum* 10, (DOML 1:199).

the Father. A central issue here is the relationship of scripture to sin, error, and fallenness. Barth argues that scripture has a "capacity for error" and that in it the Word takes up "faulty human words" and makes them witnesses to the Word. Here the analogy with Christ stumbles. Christ has no "capacity for error" in the same sense.[100] One way to begin to articulate the difference here is that while the Son takes on sinful human flesh and redeems it by living without even the capacity for sin, in scripture, the Spirit causes human words and histories—enmeshed in human sin—to become signs through which the Word speaks. The Word is enfleshed in scripture, but in a subordinate and lesser sense.

Third, God turns even those limits of scripture toward our good.[101] In scripture the Word takes up human speech, necessarily marked by the fall, and uses it to come close to humans. For Origen this is most obvious in his account of how sensory language can bring readers close to Christ. Christ speaks through the difficulties of those very limits. Christ, as Origen argues in his sermons on Joshua's Conquests, "teaches peace through this very reading of wars."[102] The skins which are a mark of human shame, for Augustine, become the tapestry that displays the saving work of God. The "fallible and faulty human word," as Barth puts it, "is as such used by God."[103]

It is fitting, therefore, to speak of scripture as wounded on analogy with the resurrected wounded body of Christ. Since scripture makes Christ present, what it makes present is not less than crucifixion and resurrection. This is the pattern of Barth's assertions about the miracle of

---

[100] While Barth does argue for theology to declare more boldly that Christ took on sinful human nature, following 2 Cor. 5:21, (see especially *CD* I/2, 147-159) he certainly insists that "Jesus Christ cannot sin." There is no "capacity" for sin in Christ, as well as no actual sin. Barth insists on this in recollection of the struggle of Maximus against monothelitism. *CD* I/2, 158.

[101] Maximus' *Ambiguum* 7 is an extended meditation on the theme of God's use of our limits for our good. He reflects there on Gregory Nazianzen's statement that our "very weakness that has been yoked to us might be an education." Maximus, *Ambiguum 7* (DOML: 75), quoting Gregory Nazianzen Oration 14.7.

[102] Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, translated by Barbara Bruce (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 14.1.

[103] Barth, *CD* I/2, 533.

scripture becoming for us the Word of God, and Origen's account of stumbling blocks revealing glory. To read scripture well is to participate in the resurrection of the dead.

~

In this chapter we have seen how in scripture, the Word of God takes on human words, images, and histories. In these fallen human modes of speech the Word may be misunderstood, mis-used, and mocked. In these human patterns of speech scripture may itself be used to wound and oppress. All those capacities I include under the category of "wounds," something I elaborate in the next chapter. In order to see those wounds more clearly we must first turn to the wounds of Christ, their power to heal, and the human capacity to misuse them.

Chapter 2

The Healing Word: Burdened Reading Amid Wounds

If with Origen, Maximus, Barth and others we can trace an analogy between Christ and scripture, and if we may begin to speak of scripture as bearing wounds like Christ's, how should we understand those wounds? In what sense are scripture and its readers "wounded?" In order to answer this question I will first explore Christ's wounds. How do the wounds of Christ remain without festering, so that the disciple may be healed with them? I introduce this problem through Shelly Rambo's reflections on the encounter between Thomas and the risen Christ, then turn to my main interlocutor, Julian of Norwich, for an exploration of the persistence of Christ's wounds and their healing capacity. I engage Julian of Norwich as a fruitful figure for reflecting on wounds, but again I survey a handful of other figures—ancient, medieval, and contemporary—to scope the extent of tradition's shared terrain. I find that Christ's wounds remain after the resurrection as a source of power and healing, but one laden with the risk of Christian misuse as well. So too for the wounds of scripture.

After this I provide an account of scripture, language, fallenness and what precisely it means to speak of scripture as "wounded." We cannot describe scripture's wounds universally and abstractly. Instead, we can only articulate these wounds in relation to specific contexts and communities. Such context specificity befits scripture, for scripture participates in the Word who became flesh among one people in a certain place and time. Just as the Word of God took flesh as Jesus Christ, so too Christians' encounter with the Word in scripture always takes place mediated

by contexts of formation and malformation. That is the site of scripture's wounds, and those of its readers.

Because of this context specificity, the response that the Spirit calls forth from human readers is not a certain universal procedure of reading, but the practical and compassionate wisdom that attends to particulars. Thus in this chapter's final section I suggest that reading this kind of text calls for the virtue of compassion: a struggle to tend these wounds out of love. I turn to the language of virtue on purpose. This essay is not an exercise in biblical studies. Rather than outlining the nature of scripture and the way it ought to be read in all times and places, I explore how contexts and histories of interpretation help constitute readers of scripture. Readers of scripture only ever receive it through such relations. To abstract scripture-reading from context-specific patterns of moral formation is to evade the incarnational dynamic at its heart. Readers of scripture are wounded not by a text itself but by the embodiment of that text in forms of life. So too such wounds must be tended through the practical wisdom displayed in compassionate enactments of the text.

2.1 Healing Wounds

In this first section, I offer reflections on the power of Christ's wounds to heal and their availability for human misuse. The next section relates these findings to scripture and locates the wounds of scripture in the relationship between text and community.

2.1.1 Open wounds

The encounter of the apostle Thomas with the risen Christ in John 20 centers Christian reflection on the persistence and power of the wounds of Christ. For many patristic writers, it

concretized the accommodation of God in Christ to human frailty. Christ's human wounds become a site of healing for the wounds of all humanity. Thus the sixth-century Pope Gregory the Great writes, "The divine mercy ordained that a doubting disciple should, by feeling in his Master the wounds of the flesh, heal in us the wounds of unbelief."[104] The physical wounds of Christ stretch out, in Gregory's imagery, to envelop the spiritual wounds of humanity and heal them, as later readers figure themselves and their own doubts in this story of Christ's encounter with Thomas. For the sixth-century Byzantine hymnodist Romanos the Melodist, Christ's wounds overflow with power, explicitly evoking the scene of the Burning Bush in Exodus 3. Jesus' side becomes, in Romanos' telling, a "flaming bone" that must necessarily produce such wonder as to terrify and frighten away human observers. "Who," Romanos asks, "protected the hand of the disciple which was not melted at the time when he approached the fiery side of the Lord?... How could a right hand of clay have touched sufferings which had shaken Heaven and earth?'"[105] The wound becomes an opening in which the fire of the Spirit passes through Thomas to all believers after him. Because Christ's wounds are sites of healing, they are sites of power as well.

Shelly Rambo has recently raised the concern that Christian theological reflection on wounds—especially in this encounter with Thomas in John 20—have tended to escape from the enduring reality of Jesus' wounds. In *Resurrecting Wounds,* she takes the story of Thomas and Jesus in John 20 as a focal point for excavating Christian conceptions of wounds and their place in the resurrection. She argues that for John Calvin, "the wounds are merely instrumental in

---

[104] Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies,* translated by David Hurst (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990), 26.
[105] Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion on Doubting Thomas,* 30:1-3. Quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament IVb: John 11-21.* Edited by Joel Elowsky, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007), 372.

leading Thomas to believe."[106] She quotes Calvin's suggestions that it would be "absurd" that Christ remains wounded now, for "the *use of wounds was temporary."*[107] She summarizes, "they have served their purpose. At this point in Calvin's commentary, *the wounds disappear."*[108] The wounds are "signs of God's accommodation, of God's lowering Godself to human limitation, but wounds are only necessary to bring about faith for those most limited."[109] For this view, "life, if is to triumph over death, must not retain the marks of death. Wounds must be erased."[110] But, she argues, this does justice neither to the story of Jesus' encounter with Thomas, nor to the reality of suffering. It elides the most crucial and painful element about traumatic histories, which is that "the wounds remain."[111]

Instead, Rambo argues for an account of Jesus' wounds in John 20 that emphasizes their enduring reality and importance not merely as instruments for the development of rational faith. The wounds of Jesus' resurrected body become a site for theological reflection on "life as marked by wounds and yet recreated through them."[112] The wounded and resurrected Christ, for Rambo, invites his followers into a healing ministry that begins with his own body, extends to theirs and beyond to the whole world. As Roberto Goizueta, Rowan Williams, and others have observed, this and other post-resurrection encounters also tend the psychological wounds dealt and received by the disciples, beginning with their betrayal of Jesus. Jesus encourages Thomas and others to face those wounds, including their unfaithfulness to Jesus, so that they become part of a new

---

[106] Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living the Afterlife of Trauma* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 24.
[107] Rambo, *Resurrection Wounds,* quoted on page 30. From, Calvin, *Commentary on John,* 2:274-5. Emphasis original.
[108] Ibid. Emphasis original.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid., 36.
[111] Ibid., 42.
[112] Ibid., 7.

history rather than festering secretly. As Goizueta puts it, "before there can be a restoration of companionship, there must be a restoration of memory… past suffering remains forever a part of the history of the resurrection."[113]

If Rambo's complaint finds purchase in Calvin's work, it cannot be so straightforwardly levelled at the whole of Christian theological reflection on John 20, as she sometimes suggests. However, her point about the enduring quality of Jesus' wounds, and their irreducibility to any pedagogical purpose is surely correct. Even in the above brief sampling from Gregory the Great and Romanos the Melodist we can see how Thomas can become a hollow figure filled only by his representation of the challenge of unbelief. The literal wounds of Christ then slip easily into figures of the apparently more fundamental spiritual wounds of doubt. Rambo provides a check on readings of John 20. With Romanos and others, we can say that healing power flows from Christ's wounds in this encounter with Thomas. With Rambo we can add that this healing centers around tending the wound and participating in its witness, rather than erasing it.

Julian of Norwich provides a rich account of such participation.[114] For Julian, Christ's wounds conspicuously abide. While these wounds are unique, the lover of Christ too comes to share in them, at a distance, as they follow him. Consistent with medieval devotional literature, Julian envisions the wound in Christ's side as a place of refuge, birth, and healing. In one showing Christ reveals to Julian that the wound in his side has become "a beautiful and delightful

---

[113] Roberto Goizueta, *Christ our Companion*, 14. Williams states of Peter's encounter with the risen Christ on the shore of the Galilee, "[Peter's] failure must be assimilated, lived through again, and brought to good and not to destructive issue. The recovery of memory is radically different from regression…For John, Galilee is the place where the past is recovered in such a way as to make it the foundation for a new and extended identity." 29. *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Pilgrim Press, 2002), 29..

[114] Caroline Walker Bynum calls Julian's work "the fullest articulation in the Middle Ages of a theology of participation," *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 204.

place which was large enough for all mankind who shall be saved to rest there in peace and love."[115] But if this wound has become a place of blessing, it has not stopped bleeding. Julian delights in mixing horror and beauty in her imagery to depict this bloody persistence. In one early showing she sees a vision of Christ bleeding profusely in her room to such an extent that "the whole bed would have been blood-soaked."[116] Another time she sees blood dropping from Christ's head where it is pierced by the crown of thorns, like "drops of water which fall from the eaves," a vision she describes as "alive and vivid, horrifying and awe-inspiring, sweet and lovely" and imparting "the strongest sense of spiritual safety."[117] This sweet and horrifying blood even begins to do things, in her telling. "The precious plenty of his beloved blood descended into hell and burst their bonds" and from there it now "overflows the whole earth."[118] That same blood "ascended into heaven to the blessed body" of Christ but there, curiously, it still "bleeds and intercedes for us" and indeed "flows throughout the heavens forever." Jesus' wounds now heal not because they have sealed off—they remain open and bleeding. But the flowing blood no longer indicates death, but life. Caroline Walker Bynum summarizes it this way: for Julian, "Blood is love."[119] The blood which was a sign of terror has become joy, though it continues to mark the effects of sin.

This blood invites participation.[120] At the beginning of her work she writes that she prayed for what she calls three gifts and three wounds. These "three wounds," are, for her,

---

[115] Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love,* translated into modern English by Elizabeth Spearing (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 76.
[116] Ibid., 60.
[117] Ibid., 51.
[118] Ibid., 60.
[119] Bynum, *Wonderful Blood,* 207.
[120] Janet Martin Soskice notes, "Although beginning with the stricken Christ,…Julian does not proceed with a series of heart-wrenching reflections on pains and piercings….Instead Julian tuns almost at once to the doctrine of the Trinity"

contrition, compassion, and an "earnest longing for God."[121] The wounds of Christ should not be a spectacle. Rather, gazing on the wounds of Christ should incite repentance and love. The wounds of Christ, for Julian, invite transformation.

The Word's assumption of human nature grounds this transformation. Julian's overwhelming priority in her writings is to articulate the closest spiritual unity between Christ and humanity. In a moving passage, she articulates how this unity came about.

> God never began to love humankind, for just as humankind shall be in eternal bliss…so has that same humankind been, in God's foresight, known and loved according to God's righteous purpose since before time began. And by the eternal consent and agreement of the whole Trinity, Christ would be the ground and the head of these fair beings, he from whom we all come, in whom we are all enclosed, into whom we shall all return.[122]

Humans are bound to Christ and there is a part of us that always remains with Christ simply because he is the head of our "fair kind." Julian can think of all this both in terms of redemption and creation, but creation seems to be the more fundamental of the two. The implication of her argument (reminiscent of Maximus' earlier and Barth's later account) is something like: God made humanity *because* the Son eternally purposed to become human. Humanity's predestination included unity with God from the moment of creation. "In our making he bound and united us to himself."[123] This union is strained but not overcome by the depredations of sin. As Caroline Walker Bynum summarizes, "The Son who stands as a new Adam before the Father wears our

---

and an account of how we are enfolded into God. *The Kindness of God*: *Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 139.

[121] Ibid., 42

[122] Ibid., 129.

[123] Ibid., 139.

mortal flesh as a clean garment and upon his head a crown that is us.[124]" This mutual indwelling, interpenetration, and enclosure is Julian's most fundamental teaching. Creation and redemption together are the profound work of love by which God welcomes human nature home.

Christ suffers out of compassion for humanity, with whom he is united. All humanity—indeed, all creation—feels the weight of that suffering. "When he was in pain, we were in pain. And all creatures who were capable of suffering, suffered with him…the firmament and the earth failed for sorrow."[125] The marks of the suffering of all will not fade away. Even in the eschaton they will remain—on Christ and his kin alike—as badges of honor that show what it cost to love.[126]

Julian's work builds on a broader tradition of Christian reflection. In the patristic period Christ's wounds were understood to be salvific. Augustine writes that in Christ's wounded side, "the gate of life was opened, whence the sacraments of the church poured forth."[127] These convictions flowered into medieval devotional literature that construed the wounds of Christ as a means by which the believer joined herself to him.[128] For Bonaventure, Christ's bodily wounds are a tangible sign linked inextricably with his "invisible wound of love" in which Christ's followers also can participate.[129] Catherine of Siena sees Jesus inviting her to drink from his side

---

[124] Bynum, *Wonderful Blood,* 205.
[125] Ibid., 68.
[126] Ibid., 62.
[127] Quoted in George Hardin Brown's "From the Wound in Christ's Side to the Wound in his Heart" in *Poetry, Place, and Gender*.
[128] For an overview of side-wound mysticism, see George Hardin Brown's "From the Wound in Christ's Side to the Wound in his Heart" in ed. Catherine Karkov, *Poetry, Place, and Gender: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honor of Helen Damlico* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008).
[129] Quoted in George Hardin Brown's "From the Wound in Christ's Side to the Wound in his Heart" in *Poetry, Place, and Gender*. In "The Mystical Vine," in *The Works of Bonaventure*, trans. De Vinck, 155.

so that "[her] soul shall become enraptured."[130] The conviction that unites all these (at times unnerving) images is this: Christ's wounds heal not through an abstract accounting, but because through them, the Spirit draws all humanity into relation with Christ.[131]

For Julian and the tradition more broadly, not only do the wounds of Christ heal, but humans participate in them. As sinners, humans are the cause of those wounds. When Christ suffers, all creation suffers because its being is joined to his. Faced with these wounds, humans may be turned back toward salvation as contrition and compassion incite transformation into the image of Christ, who is the ground of all being. In this sense Christians claim Isaiah's prophecy about the "suffering servant": "By his bruises we are healed" (53:5b). Such a claim celebrates the renewal of life, not death. But it may be misused.

2.1.2 Festering wounds

Contemporary womanist theologians, among others, have raised concerns about the use of the cross to justify the continued suffering of marginalized groups. The wounds described here by Julian risk festering instead of healing. Most prominently, womanist theologian Delores Williams has argued that interpreting Christ's sufferings as redemptive has legitimized the suffering of Black women. On her telling, the celebration of Christ's suffering on behalf of sinners encourages others to take on suffering voluntarily. This can result in justifying existing forms of oppression. Specifically, she identifies Christ as a figure of "surrogate suffering" and

---

[130] Quoted by Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 172.

[131] For a contemporary account of wounds as sites of transformation, see the work of Gloria Anzaldua. She writes, in response to the 9/11 attacks, "We are accountable for all the wars, all human disasters—none of us are blameless. We ourselves have brought this great turmoil upon ourselves. We are all wounded, but we can connection through the wound that's alienates us from others. When the wound forms a cicatrix, the scar can become a bridge, linking people split apart." *Light in the Dark/ Luz en el Oscuro* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 21.

likens this to the long history of Black women forced into forms of surrogacy and surrogate suffering. "Surrogacy, attached to this divine personage, thus takes on an aura of the sacred."[1] But if redemption is pictured as surrogate suffering, Williams insists, it can offer Black women no liberation from their suffering. Instead, the cross valorizes and justifies that suffering. Thus Williams rejects any notion that the sufferings of Christ are in and of themselves redemptive, stating most boldly that Christ "does not conquer sin through death on the cross."[132] She focuses, rather, on Jesus' ministry as the means of redemption. His teachings, his healing, his radical restructuring of forms of gender relations all present a new way of being in the world that offers Black women the means of survival. "Humankind is, then, redeemed through Jesus' ministerial vision of life and not through his death. There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross."[133] For Williams, the imperative is to state that "God did not intend the surrogacy roles" that Black women "have been forced to perform" and this, for her, requires unhooking redemption from the cross.[134] On this reading, healing and liberation cannot flow from the wounds of Christ. Instead, those wounds fester and spread infection to all they touch. Where Julian of Norwich sees Christ's blood as a fountain of life, Williams sees in it only death.

Other womanist and Black liberation theologians motivated by similar concerns have offered a more nuanced account, sympathizing with Williams' critiques but finding ways to narrate the centrality of the cross for redemption nonetheless. M. Shawn Copeland, in providing a reading of how enslaved Black women made sense of their suffering, argues that

---

[132] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, 2013), 147. Elsewhere she states, "Redemption of humans can have nothing to do with any kind of surrogate or substitute role Jesus was reputed to have played in a bloody act that supposedly gained victory over sin and/or evil" 146.
[133] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness,* 148.
[134] Ibid., 147.

> If the makers of the spirituals gloried in singing of the cross of Jesus, it was not because they were masochistic and enjoyed suffering. Rather, the enslaved Africans sang because they saw on the rugged wooden planks One who had endured what was their daily portion. The cross was treasured because it enthroned the One who went all the way with them and for them. They saw the result of the cross—triumph over the principalities and powers of death.[135]

As she narrates the details of several slave narratives, Copeland discerns how these women took up the sufferings they endured to secure their emancipation and the well-being of their children willingly and saw that suffering as participation in the suffering of Christ. This is a dangerous path, Copeland acknowledges: "The ground beneath his cross figures an ambiguous, even contested, place. The cross of the crucified Jesus has been misused to blasphemous ends."[136] But unlike Williams she holds that abuse does not invalidate use. What Williams sees as the cross's essence, Copeland views as its malformation.[137] The cross is not simply a negation of Jesus' ministry, it is the ultimate expression of the love that set his ministry in motion.[138] The enslaved Africans singing spirituals about Christ on the cross knew it not as an affirmation of forced surrogacy, but as "the complete rejection of violence" and indeed as "the power to live and to love—even when violence does its worst."[139] Womanist theologian JoAnne Marie Terrell poses a similar critique of Williams, acknowledging the misuse of the cross even as she insists on the

---

[135] M. Shawn Copeland, "Wading Through Many Sorrows: Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective," in Emilie Townes ed., *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 120.
[136] M. Shawn Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 135.
[137] James Cone follows this line of argument as well. While deeply sympathetic with Williams' critiques, he draws this contrast between the two in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013) 149-151.
[138] As Roberto Goizueta puts it, "the wounds on Christ's glorified body are the incarnated memory of the bonds that defined his life and death. Jesus' wounds are the direct, inevitable consequence of his compassionate relationships with the poor, sinners, prostitutes and other presumed unsavory characters. The wounds are also the consequences of betrayed relationships." *Christ our Companion*, 12.
[139] Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 34-35.

wounds of Christ as a "supreme reminder of God's *with-us-ness*…a symbol of God's continuous empowerment."[140]

Copeland and Terrell see the cross as the bittersweet flowering of Jesus' ministry, where Williams sees in it only death. As Copeland puts it, "his mission on behalf of the reign of God required of Jesus something bold: that he stake his whole life and very personhood on their being absolutely directed toward God in love without measure."[141] The cross is the supreme expression of perfect *human* love. On the cross "Jesus enfleshes for all of us the very meaning of being human, of being a person who embraces and lives out God's gracious gift of freedom in love and hope."[142] In his life and death Jesus opens a way of being, a place for humans to stand in relation to the one he called Father and in relation to each other.

This means that to look on the wounds of Christ is to be called to risk similar wounds. Not because suffering will save—here Copeland and Terrell agree with Williams—but because these wounds invite Christians to love concretely as Jesus loved, and therefore risk being wounded in the same way. This is what attention to the suffering of the enslaved can tell us, Copeland argues. It can show how the sign of Christ's cross, so often abused, can become a sign of resistance, solidarity, and transformation. In their writing, the enslaved women accomplished a retrieval of the imagery of the cross. In Copeland's reading, "Their steadfast commitment honored that cross and the One who died for all and redeemed it from Christianity's vulgar misuse." [143] They redeemed their suffering through directing it to identification with Christ and to

---

[140] JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African-American Experience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 125.
[141] Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified*, 118.
[142] Ibid., 173.
[143] Copeland, "Wading Through Many Sorrows," 124.

those on whose behalf they suffered on the way to freedom. Thus, "the dark wisdom of the enslaved people teaches us not how to avoid or deny suffering but how to suffer suffering."[144]

As with Julian, then, participation defines Copeland's account of the cross, including its pain, its misuse, and its transfiguration. Christ's wounds heal because they are a sign of Christ's willingness to manifest his unity and solidarity with sinful humanity to the utter limit. These wounds that heal can, through human misuse, also fester. But, as Copeland argues, this does not obviate the power of the Spirit to bring healing out of the cross again, even after horrific misuse.

2.1.3 The Word in wounded words

These same patterns are visible in the use of scripture. In scripture, the Word of God condescends to be revealed and witnessed to by human words. Scripture is therefore "wounded" in the sense that in it, Jesus Christ, who is the perfect Word of God, is rendered legible in finite and fallen human words, subjecting him to the malformations of human readers. But despite this misuse, the Word spurns neither human flesh nor human words. The Word assumes flesh and bears wounds in order to be present within all creation. Likewise, The Word assumes human language in scripture and, as a result, takes on the wounds of human words that can be put to evil ends. The Word who has been wounded by identification with us and our broken speech can be misused to wound in turn. Just as Delores Williams' argued that the cross can be used to enjoin suffering, so too can scripture be wielded as a weapon by humans against humans.

Of course, if we venture such an analogy, we must at the same time sketch out its even greater disanalogies. If the Word, who in Jesus Christ truly dies and rises again to new life, is

---

[144] Ibid., 36. Here Copeland cites Paul Ricoeur's original quote that "Wisdom does not teach us how to avoid suffering, or how magically to deny it, or how to dissimulate it under an illusion. It teaches us how to endure, how to suffer suffering." *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 86.

"wounded" through embodiment in the words and histories of scripture, it is not a literal wounding that stands on equal footing with the crucifixion. Rather it is a wounding that finds its reference in the cross and is only intelligible in and through the literal wounds of Christ. Even more significantly, in the wounds of scripture, the line between finitude and fallenness is blurred more than it is in the crucifixion. Christ suffers not because humans are finite but because we are fallen. The kinds of lack, stretching, and capacity for misuse in scripture that I want to characterize as "wounds" blurs this division. In our incapacity and refusal to be guided well by the human words of scripture, we meet both our finitude and our fallenness together and inseparably.

Just as disciples of Christ participate—in some remote sense—in the wounds of Christ, so too readers bear and inflict wounds. But not all wounding is the same. Some forms of wounding may be entirely salutary and not due to misuse. In an image taken up later in Revelation, Hebrews 4:12 suggests that the Word of God is "sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." In scripture we see such wounding frequently. When the exiles of Israel return to the land, they "wept when they heard the words of the law (Nehemiah 8:9). When the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:22 questions Jesus and is enjoined to become poor, he "went away grieving." Such wounding is altogether righteous and good, if no less painful.

But scripture can wound through misuse as well, and this is my primary focus. If it is not the normal operating reality of scripture, it is nonetheless a deeply felt reality of our time. For a more precise sense of the agency and nature of this sort of wounding, I turn next to contemporary philosophy, before giving a final account of wounded reading.

2.2 Mediation, Language, Agency

Language is not immune to the fall. In this section I specify the nature of the wounds of scripture by addressing language and mediation. Sin pervades human communication, just as it pervades the human history that is taken up in scripture. But because we cannot isolate language from ourselves, much less our history, we cannot specify the effects of the fall on language outside of concrete people and communities. In the same way, the wounds of scripture are real but *vague*.[145] We cannot name a "wound" in scripture apart from scripture's ongoing relation with specific histories.

While I offer a philosophical account of this context-specificity, it also flows from the way in which scripture participates in the incarnation of the Word. We only encounter scripture as it is mediated through people, patterns of reading, and processes of transmission, just as the Word is mediated through the Jewish flesh of Jesus. The truth and the pain of our life with scripture cannot be narrated adequately apart from its embeddedness in contexts of reading, hearing, and transmission.

This account of context specificity runs first through a brief survey of ways of thinking about the fallenness of language. This culminates in my reading of Stanley Cavell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and what ordinary language philosophy suggests about the inseparability of text from context, as well as language from body. I then turn to Peter Ochs and return to Karl Barth, who together articulate the centrality of context for my account of the wounds of scripture.

---

[145] For a more detailed philosophical account of scripture's vagueness in relation to Origen, see Mark Randall James, *Learning the Language of Scripture: Origen, Wisdom, and the Logic of Interpretation* (Boston: Brill, 2021), 166-169.

2.2.1 Finitude, fallenness, and language

Is language itself fallen? Theologians and philosophers have provided a variety of approaches to this issue. While not providing a systematic account, early Christian commentators connected the diversity of human language with human strife and the fall, especially through commentary on the Genesis 11 account of the tower of Babel. Ephrem the Syrian suggests that war immediately broke out after God confused the languages of those building the tower at Babel, because their new difference "made them foreigners to each other."[146] Augustine extends this line of interpretation through to society of his own day. Though originally one harmonious society, the fall and its effects worked out in relation to language at Babel created a situation where "the diversity of language estranges people from each other" so that imperial cities like Rome work to impose a single language at the cost of "terrible wars."[147] The confusion and diversity of languages creates an opening for sin to separate humans from each other, they held, breeding strife when people of different groups come together.

This concern about sin, language, and strife emerged later into speculation about the structures of language itself, and whether it was possible to heal them of what some understood as the primeval wound of Babel. Umberto Eco argues that, while early Christian writers like Augustine spoke of the linguistic fall realized at Babel as a loss, that description was "not combined with the longing to recover" the linguistic unity of Babel.[148] After all, Pentecost had healed that wound. Even for Augustine, however, the diversity of Pentecost was not understood as a diversity internal to the church. He held that "one person was speaking in the tongues of all

---

[146] Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Genesis*, 8.3.2-8.4.2. Quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament I, Genesis 1-11*, ed. Andrew Louth (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 169.
[147] Augustine, *City of God*, 14, 7., page 361.
[148] Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, translated by James Fentress (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 15.

nations," suggesting that the church possessed a unity beyond rather than between the troubling diversity of language.[149] However, according to Eco, as linguistic fragmentation followed the fall of the western Roman Empire in the fifth century and following, Babel became "the story of how a real wound had been inflicted on humanity, a wound that might, in some way be healed once more."[150] This, Eco suggests, is how we ought to understand the performative force of Dante's Italian poetry, for example. Like many of his contemporaries, Dante held that Hebrew was humanity's original language and that it would have "continued to be used by all speakers , had it not been shattered through the fault of human presumption" at Babel.[151] It was preserved among the Hebrew people "so that our redeemer….should not speak the language of confusion, but that of grace."[152] Eco surmises that Dante's analytic task in *De vulgari eloquentia* was to curate the natural rhythms and contours of a vernacular language to make it fit for "grace" rather than "confusion."[153] The *Commedia,* then, was his performance of this restored language fit for grace. If language itself is not fallen then at least its current state reflects and reinforces the effects of the fall—but it was, for Dante, at least, a fall against which we have some remedy.

Another way to frame the question of the effects of the fall on language is a perennial philosophical concern with the relationship between words and the world. At the origins of this debate stands Plato's dialogue *Cratylus,* in which Socrates debates whether words are

---

[149] Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine: Sermons, (230-272B) on the Liturgical Seasons*. Volume III/7 (New York: New City Press, 1993), Sermon 268:1.
[150] Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language,* 17. "European critical culture begins with the reaction, often, alarmed, to the eruption of these tongues." 18
[151] Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia,* translated by Stephen Botterill (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13.
[152] Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia, 13.*
[153] "Confronted with the existing vernaculars, natural but not universal languages, and with a grammar that was universal but artificial, Dante sought to establish his dream of the restoration of the natural and universal *forma locuionis* of Eden. Yet unlike those in the Renaissance who wished to restore the Hebrew language itself…Dante's goal was to reinstate these original conditions in a modern intention: an illustrious vernacular, of which is own poetry would constitute the most notable achievement" Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language,* 456.

intrinsically connected to the objects they name and if so, in what way. The dialogue ends with Socrates advising Cratylus to focus on the unchanging forms rather than the shifting nature of words. Language is indispensable, it seems, but forever inadequate.

Fear about language's confusion finds its most potent and creative contemporary expressions in postmodern approaches to language. For Derrida and other deconstructionists, language (and writing especially) enacts both excess and absence in a destabilizing way. Written words can always be read beyond any intended context. This is their excess. At the same time written words always fail to fully express what is intended in their writing. This is their absence. This "duplication of duplicity" Derrida writes, "is neither an accident nor an anomaly, it is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could not even have a function."[154] In other words, language both makes the world present and cuts it off. Or rather, *writing* does all this. Derrida draws a sharp distinction between the two. "The difference between speech and writing," he says provocatively, "is sin, the anger of God emerging from itself, lost immediacy, work outside the garden [of Eden]."[155]

Among poststructuralists, the poet Edmond Jabès has articulated this anxiety about language most strikingly as a "wound." Jabès' writing emerged out of his own exile. Born in 1912 in Egypt, he was forced to emigrate along with thousands of other Egyptian Jews in 1950 (part of the same regional exodus that emptied the Iraqi town of Alqosh—which I recalled on the first page my introduction—of its Jewish residents). Like Derrida and unlike many other Mizrahi Jews of his generation, he chose Paris over Tel Aviv. His writing arises from the pain of exile and

---

[154] Derrida, Signature, Event, Context" in *Limited Inc* translated by Jeffrey Mehlmann (Northwestern University Press, 1988), 12.
[155] Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book" in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). 68.

Holocaust. If Derrida plays with religious language in his writing—recall the passage I just quoted about writing being "work outside the garden"—for Jabès the connection is much more immediate. He feels a certain inescapable intimacy between the ordinary losses of writing, as Derrida described them, and the losses of Jews as a people defined, for him, by devotion to sacred writings. In *The Book of Questions*, a two-volume poem focusing on fictional Holocaust survivors, Jabès positions writing, and "the book" as figures identical with the reality of exile and suffering. "Mark the first page of a book with a red ribbon," he writes "for the wound is inscribed at its beginning."[156] In the poem, survivors of the Holocaust struggle to bear written witness to the horrors of their suffering. Their writings stand over and against them, incapable of bearing the full extent of the terror that still grips them. "There is nothing at the threshold of the open page, it seems, but this wound of a race born of the book…Nothing but this pain, whose past and whose permanence is also that of writing."[157] We might summarize this by saying that the act of writing displaces authors from themselves, as does reading. Language, in the words of one commentor, "has *always already* been wounded by its inability to articulate."[158] This is writing as a broken tool that cuts its user in the midst of use—authorship as agony. When dealing with painful texts, and the memory of horror, this view may ring true.

And yet, what picture of language and writing do we have that we would imagine ourselves wounded *by* language, rather than *in* it? Derrida's invocation of wounds is helpful, Jabès' even more so, but I find myself siding with a critique here made by ordinary language philosophers. Phenomenologically, the contemporary ordinary language philosopher Stanley

---

[156] Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions, Volume 1* translated by Rosemarie Waldrop, (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1972), epigraph.
[157] Jabès, *The Book of Questions, Volume 1*, 25-26.
[158] Andrew Ploeg, "I Will Remain Silence and Scream: Edmond Jabès, and the Wound and Witness of Language," *Shofar* 30/2 (2012): 99.

Cavell would have no problem, I think, with Derrida's description of writing as an experience of doubling, of loss, of excess, and so on. Read charitably, we might understand the witness of deconstruction as a testimony about the difficulties of writing. How can a survivor of Auschwitz witness truly to his suffering? What kind of memoir is adequate to the fires of the Shoah? What could it possibly mean to read such a memoir with sufficient care and perception? Derrida and Jabès point to a real lack and excess that such writing brings to our awareness.

For Cavell, however, writing *demonstrates* this lack; it does not enact it. The mistake, in his view, comes when we try to diagnose our sense of separateness and loss as an intellectual lack or as a persistent feature of language itself. To do so is to set language apart from its speakers, to examine words as things outside ourselves whose inadequacies must be articulated and explored. It places blame on language instead of examining how our life in language exposes *our* inadequacies. Language is not inarticulate; we are. But instead of embracing this necessary confession, we turn away toward accounts of the inherent brokenness of language (or toward philosophical skepticism about the existence of other minds, which is Cavell's primary target here). To do so is to attempt to "convert the human condition…into an intellectual difficulty, a riddle." It is to "interpret 'a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack.'"[159] For Cavell, all this is wrapped up in Ludwig Wittgenstein's denial of private languages. To deny that private languages could exist, as Wittgenstein does, is certainly to make an argument about the way language works. Cavell observes that it is also, however, a picture of how we go wrong when our attempts to know and be known fail, as they inevitably do. The resort to a private language is a

---

[159] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 493. Here he quotes himself from "Knowing and Acknowledging" in *Must We Mean What We Say?* 2nd edition (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), 242.

logical impossibility, but in the words of Peter Dula the attempt to do so is also, as it were, "one name for loneliness."[160] Cavell states,

> The fantasy of a private language… can be understood as an attempt to account for, and protect, our separateness, our unknowingness, our unwillingness or incapacity either to know or be known. Accordingly, the failure of the fantasy signifies: that there is no assignable end to the depth of us to which language reaches; that nevertheless there is no end to our separateness. We are endlessly separate, for no reason. But then we are answerable for everything that comes between us; if not for causing it then for continuing it; if not for denying it then for affirming it; if not for it then to it.[161]

For Wittgenstein and for Cavell, the outside—language, texts, bodies—makes present what is on the inside, but with struggle. To blame our separateness on our language is to name our loneliness in error. "The human body is the best picture of the human soul," Wittgenstein states.[162] Or, as Paul Ricoeur states in much the same spirit, "the sense of a text is not behind the text, but in front of it."[163] Wittgenstein's famous duck-rabbit image does not *hide* a rabbit or a duck; it makes both present, with struggle.[164] So too language does not hide us, it makes us present to each other, but with struggle. And this struggle reveals our quite real loneliness.

Acknowledgement, in Cavell's way of speaking, is the framework within which that struggle happens. To turn away from the struggle, to turn away from acknowledging the other, and to embrace the fantasy of the private language is perhaps the most ordinary and pervasive of sins. But it is not the least consequential. "The crucified human body," he says, "is our best picture of the unacknowledged human soul."[165]

---

[160] Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 82.
[161] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 369-70.
[162] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophy of Psychology- A Fragment,* §25 in *Philosophical Investigations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1953, 2001).
[163] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 88.
[164] Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology,* 81.
[165] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason,* 430.

Curiously, the way Cavell and others have described philosophical skepticism and the possibility of knowing others parallels quite closely Barth's description of Lessing's "ugly, broad ditch" and the possibility of meeting God in scripture, and elsewhere, which I explored in the previous chapter. Cavell argues that philosophical accounts—whether in deconstruction or skepticism—that locate the difficulty of relation outside of us reframe finitude as an intellectual lack that might be puzzled through and solved. In other words, it recognizes and then avoids a real problem. So too, Barth argues that Lessing encountered a real need in his account of the difficulty of relating accidents of history to universal truth. Lessing had located "a very genuine need: the need to hide ourselves….from Jesus Christ."[166] But Lessing had misdiagnosed his lack as an insurmountable methodological problem. Cavell's "acknowledgement" maps closely onto Barth's description of the immediacy of Christ's presence. It echoes, as well, Paul Ricoeur's way of speaking about engagement with a text, not as a grasping and taking hold of something, but as "a moment of dispossession."[167] The challenge of scripture is like the challenge we encounter in coming face to face with another person and all the ways they summon forth our acknowledgement. Indeed, as the witness of the ways of God with humanity, scripture itself just is the record of such encounter.

If the problem does not lie in language, but ourselves, then does this mean that language (and scripture) is free from the effects of the fall? I think we should say, rather, that language is

---

[166] Barth, *CD,* 292.

[167] Paul Ricoeur, "Appropriation, in this way, cease to appear as a kind of possession, as a way of taking hold of things; instead it implies a moment of dispossession of the egoistic and narcistic ego…Only the interpretation that complies with the injunction of the text, that follows the 'arrow' of the sense and that tries to think accordingly, initiates a new self-understanding. In this self-understanding , I would oppose the self, which proceeds from the understanding of the text, to the ego, which claims to precede it. It is the text, with its universal power of world disclosure, which gives a self to the ego." *Interpretation Theory,* 94-95.

one more area in which humans live sinfully. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to specify the fallenness of language without falsely positioning ourselves outside the problem.

The most fitting genre to investigate language's lack is confession. In my life in words with others, I fail to make myself known honestly. I hold back and avoid that which must be said. I let go and speak angry words to my son when a kind phrase might bring us close. I listen with half an ear to a friend. Or, I listen carefully but cannot understand the source of their pain. I read a draft of my writing, or yours, with an abundance of charity and attention that still fails to enable me to discern what it is that ought to be said in it and of it. English does not constrain me from the outside. My participation in the history that is English runs up against a legacy of wounds that I cannot fail to exacerbate. We are not wounded by words, but in words. We fall in language every day.

2.2.2 Vagueness

So too for scripture. We are not wounded by scripture, but in scripture. That is to say, the wounds of the Bible can only be specified in relation to some particular human reader or community and the way their habits of reading are bound up with real suffering. This does not mean that the wounds of scripture consist only in its readers in an entirely subjective sense. Rather, it means that the objective quality of woundedness is only visible in the histories and practices of interpretation of specific communities.

For Barth, again, any account of error or lack in scripture must be stated vaguely and not specified in a universal account. As I have already noted, Barth speaks freely of scripture's

"capacity for error."[168] He insists, in the preface to the third edition of his Romans commentary, that it is not the task of exegesis to identify the various human voices in scripture and select which among them is the voice of Christ. All the voices in scripture are human voices. It is the task of the interpreter is to keep wrestling with the text "until paradoxically he has seen the whole in the fragments…so that all the other spirits are seen in some way or other to serve the Spirit of Christ."[169] The ambiguities in scripture, its capacity for errors, and the conflicting voices we read in it—all of these can and do become witnesses to divine revelation by the power of the Spirit. Any attempt to delimit some voices as more or less worthy of being such a witness is thus in contradiction to the Spirit's movement. Such an attempt would indeed be a way of standing in idolatrous judgment over scripture. Scripture has a realized capacity for errors, but these cannot be articulated universally. If we want to speak of scripture universally and abstractly, we must speak of such capacity vaguely. What wounds some does not wound all.

Barth's account here is useful for balancing an affirmation of the reality and authority of scripture with its real, non-divine, and therefore fallen human character. However, his writing does not portray what encountering such an "error" would actually look like. We have in Barth a conceptual account of scripture's reality, but lack an account of what this is like for readers.

Peter Ochs provides such an account through his reflection on Jewish practices of reading. In his essay "The Bible's Wounded Authority" Ochs outlines how traditional rabbinic practices of reading assume that scripture bears wounds bound up with ours. Such practices proceed "not from text to answers, but from question to question."[170]

---

[168] Karl Barth, *CD I/2*, 508.
[169] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 17.
[170] Ochs, "The Bible's Wounded Authority," in ed. William P. Brown, *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 116.

This model of biblical interpretation has everything to do with suffering. It binds together the wounds of the reader and the text. Ochs' notes a variety of "wounds" in scripture: grammatical, syntactical, historical, as well as those that seem to contradict deeply felt religious experience. How, for examples, did the Jewish rabbis read Isaiah 60:21 in long years of exile: "your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever?" How could that promise of living in the land from which they had been exiled not ring painfully false? Or consider the words of another contemporary Jewish scholar, David Weiss Halivni. In his memoir of Holocaust survival he includes an epigraph of his own making, based on a midrash. The first half of the epigraph quotes a midrash: "said the Almighty, 'If you keep what is written in this book, you will be spared this sword; if not, you will be consumed by it.' (Midrash Rabbah Deuteronomy 4:2)." Halivni continues, in his own words, summarizing the fires of Auschwitz: "We clung to the book, yet were consumed by the sword."[171] That is, they held on to scripture and were slaughtered in the midst of the embrace that should have made them safe. To be wounded by scripture in this way (as my chapter on Anna Jansz will illustrate) is to find painful discord between its apparent promises and current reality.

If the text's "wounds" are bound up with a people's context, so too the healing of the text's wounds can provide healing in the reading community as well. Ochs summarizes the solution of the rabbis as it came to be canonized in the *Pirke Avot* prayers:

> To "mend" the text is to answer such questions by way of a *derashah*, a "searching out" or interpretation of the text that settles its syntactical or semantic incongruity at the same time that it both uncovers and heals complementary incongruities or wounds in the reader's own heart. Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1 appears to read Is. 60:21 in just such a way. Its profound *midrash*...is displayed in a single phrase: "All Israel

---

[171] David Weiss Halivni, *The Book and the Sword: A Life of Learning the Shadow of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux Publishers, 1996), epigraph to the book.

> have a portion in the world-to-come, as it is written, 'Your people shall all be righteous, they shall possess the land forever.'[172]

By including the entire body of Israel across time in a promise fulfilled at the end of time, this reading of Isaiah by the Mishnah not only addresses what might seem like a literal error in the text, but also brings a word of comfort to those suffering exile. Thus, for Ochs, to "mend" the text is never literally to rewrite the words of the Bible. It is instead to mend "a time-specific relationship between the written text and some community of readers."[173] The "wound" Ochs details in Isaiah 60:21 is not a wound that can be articulated except in relation to Jews living in exile. For Jews reading in Jerusalem today, for example, it may well not be a "wound" at all. But as my fifth chapter will illustrate, it is now a wound for Palestinian Christians.

Drawing on the work of Halivni, Ochs argues that these very wounds in scripture are sites of revelation. "The holiness of scripture inheres in its maculations, its points of error or woundedness."[174] This is because tending to such points of pain can draw the reader into a deeper relationship of healing with the text, like the rabbis reading Isaiah 60:21.

> When I bring my suffering to the text of scripture, I notice *its* wounds, first; I am drawn to tend them; and *only* after being engaged in the work of 'mending' them do I realize that my own wounds correspond to the text's and that the more deeply I care for the text's wounds, the more deeply my own wounds are healed.[175]

Ochs' approach adds two elements to Barth's account of scripture's capacity for error. First, he describes the *interconnectedness* of scripture's wounds and the wounds of the reader. Second, Ochs makes our notions of that interconnected woundedness *particular*: we cannot specify the "errors" in scripture universally, but only in relation to a particular context.

---

[172] Ochs, "The Bible's Wounded Authority," 117.
[173] Ibid., 118.
[174] Ibid., 117.
[175] Ibid., 117.

2.2.3 The Word's mediation after Babel

Fallenness marks human life in words. Scripture names the reality that God elects the words of the Bible as witnesses to the Word of God. The human limits and worlds of sin to which these words are bound up become, by grace, signs of the Word. Scripture is truly wounded, in a distant analogue to the way Christ himself is wounded, insofar as in scripture, human fallibility is made to bear divine infallibility. This names not simply a specific grapheme, or word, or story in isolation but rather a dynamic that is present in the whole of scripture's reality, extending from the human histories that scripture emerges from and the chains of textual transmission that extend it, to human uses of scripture that become part of its reception. Scripture is our wounded life in words that become, for us, the Word of God.

Lauren Winner provides a precise vocabulary for articulating wounds or "damage" of this sort. For Winner, gifts of the kind God gives to us

> cannot be damaged in or by the Giver (who is perfect)…They can be damaged only in or by the recipient—either because the recipient is damaged, or because a recipient like *this* (a three-year-old) will be likely to receive a gift like *that* (a Meissen ornament) badly. Thus it can be said that God gives damaged gifts. The only gifts of God that could be otherwise are gifts given and received in the eschaton, and gifts given and received among and between members of the Trinity.[176]

Scripture is just such a damaged gift. God gives it perfectly and we receive it with closed fists. Indeed, God gives it to us precisely through our own weakness. From the birth of the gift in human speech and writing through its continuous transmission and reception, that weakness is woven through its fabric, an inextricable part of the nature of scripture. It is God's good pleasure to make even that same weakness an instrument for the self-disclosure of the Word.

---

[176] Lauren Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 144-5.

As an image of this dynamic, consider the bronze serpent Moses raised in the wilderness in Numbers 21. The Lord commanded Moses to make a serpent and "set it on a pole" so that every snake-bitten Israelite could look upon it and live. This divine gift came on the scene already as a response to the sins of the people, who cried out against the God who delivered them from Egypt and fed them with manna. Indeed, it came in the shape of a graven image, tinged with idolatry. This gift's receivers damaged it. Centuries later it seems it became an idol in truth, and so in an iconoclastic purge King Hezekiah "broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it" (2 Kings 18:4b). How could a people not misuse a gift like *that*—coming to them, as it did, in the shape of their own weakness? Happily, it would seem, in John 3 Christ redeems this weakness, calling his crucifixion a reenactment of the snake lifted up in the wilderness. But as Delores Williams reminds us, Christians misuse even the cross.

Judith Butler has outlined both this difficulty and a way through it. When faced by an artifact that has been part of the system of some oppression, the options are not limited to acquiescing to its use or refusing it. We may also "mobilize the signifier for an alternative production."[177] That is, we may reclaim, repurpose, and subversively renew what we receive. This, according to Eugene Rogers, is "what Jesus does at the Last Supper. He takes the language of violent execution and turns it to a peaceful feast. 'This is my body, broken for you.' 'This is

---

[177] Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations," in Seyla Benhabib, et al., *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 52. Quoted in Eugene Rogers, *Blood Theology: Seeing Red in Body- and God-Talk* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 10. As Rogers puts it later, ""There is a third option beyond repristinating the terms and ignoring their power: that is to repeat the terms subversively, to queer them, to bend them like a blue note, to remove them from conditions of violence, and to mobilize them – how? – as Jesus does in the Last Supper." 26.

my blood, poured out for many.'"[178] This is what God does by authorizing the bronze serpent's use in the first place. God turns what had been an artifact of evil—worshipping a graven image—into an occasion of renewal and healing. And God continues to renew this image even after humans turn it back into a system of idolatry. Scripture is like the snake raised up in the wilderness: abused and renewed again and again.

An image from Irenaeus, the second-century bishop of Lyons, might clarify this dynamic. Irenaeus suggested that scripture is like a mosaic of a king whose tiles can be maliciously misarranged into the image of a dog. This, he says, is what heretics do. "They disregard the order and the connection of the scriptures and, as much as in them lies, they disjoint the members of the truth."[179] Irenaeus' metaphor is justly famous as a description of the task of interpretation and its characteristic damages. I add only this: a gift like a mosaic cannot help but be misused in precisely this way when given to mischievous children such as we are. After all, the tiles of *this* mosaic come to us each with a history of bloody misuse. Fallible human masons carved them. Some of their edges are chipped; some are rubbed smooth on the wrong side, so that we misalign them. And yet, one of the wonders of the gift of scripture is that we may see the image of Christ within it, again and again. The square tiles may come together now in this way, now in that, and produce visions of the King not seen before. Scripture's blessings, and the curses we have woven into it, meet us inseparably. It could not be otherwise, if scripture witnesses to the Word made flesh, who took our weakness and saved us in and through it.

---

[178] Rogers, *Blood Theology,* 10.

[179] Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies,* 1.8.1., page 41. "Suppose someone would take the beautiful image of a king, carefully made out of precious stones by a skillful artist, and would destroy the features of the man on it and change around and rearrange the jewels, and make the form of a dog, or a fox, out of them, and that a rather bad piece of work. Suppose he would then say with determination that this is the beautiful image of the king that the skillful artist had made, at the same time pointing out the jewels which had been beautifully fitted together by the first artist into the image."

Scripture's opacity, its humanity, anything about it that might give offense—these can and are ultimately made to witness to the Word of God. But as human words, scripture wounds along the way. The Word of God speaks through the book of Ezekiel, but the prophet's metaphor of sinful Israel as a woman justly raped with divine approval wounds readers who have suffered sexual violence.[180] The Word of God speaks through the book of Philemon, but these words enjoining the submission of Onesimus have also wounded enslaved people seeking liberation. God speaks in and through the book of Joshua, but these human words have also wounded contemporary Palestinian Christians who seek to understand, through scripture, who they are as displaced non-Jews in the Holy Land of their birth.[181] The Word of God speaks through the household codes of the New Testament epistles, but these human words have wounded women whose giftedness has not been recognized by Christian communities. Consider also the wounds the first chapter of Romans inflicts on queer readers; the burden for the disabled of witnessing the Bible's regular identification between disability and sin;[182] or what it might be like to hear the Gospel of John—with its routine denigration of "the Jews" as the enemy of Jesus—as a Jewish reader, particularly a baptized Jewish reader. The words of scripture take flesh among us, joining humans to the Word. But as these words shape lives in this way, they also mark, tear, and wound.

---

[180] See, for example, Ezekiel 16. Renita Weems asks, in her account of this specific metaphor, "What effect does reading descriptions of women battered, mutilated, and raped as a poetic device for divine judgment have on audiences who have been raped and battered and who live daily with the imminent threat of being raped and battered?" in *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 85.
[181] See, for example, Naim Ateek's question: "How can the Old Testament be the word of God in light of Palestinian Christians' experiences with its use to support Zionism*?"* in *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (MaryKnoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 78.
[182] See, for example, the work of John Hull. Especially *In the Beginning there was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversation with the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 2001).

2.3 Tending Scripture with Compassion

Reflection on exegetical method can allow Christians to hear the life-giving Word more clearly in their reading. However, in this essay I focus more holistically on what it means to be a virtuous reader of scripture amid wounds such as these. A narrow and programmatic focus on exegesis can lead to the presumption that any problems we face in reading scripture are problems of procedure. On such a view there are no wounds of scripture, only misunderstandings. That fails to do justice to the depth of the challenge scripture faces us with and the way that challenge is inextricably embedded not simply in strategies of reading, but in histories and lives. In the chapters that follow I engage three cases of readers who encounter life-defining wounds echoed back to them in scripture. I attend to each case by linking together exegetical practice, historical context, and reception history with the biography of the individual. In this section, I outline the challenge of reading virtuously amid the social wounds that define one's life.

Eugene Rogers has argued, following Aquinas, that right interpretation combines the craft of hermeneutics with prudential ethical judgments. "It is the office of hermeneutics to promote an ordered diversity, of ethics to evaluate the results, and of providence to control the outcome."[183] Good interpretation has as much or more to do with the virtues of the interpreter as it does with their hermeneutical prowess. Thus, when the Bible wounds, we may sometimes find hermeneutical solutions, but much of the time we will be left in the arena of ethical discernment, of a life lived with the difficulties of the text and the communities in which those difficulties emerge. We are left, in short, with virtue and prayer.[184] Virtues of reading may seem an odd

---

[183] Eugene Rogers, "How the Virtues of an Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics: The Case of Thomas Aquinas," *The Journal of Religion*, 76(1), 64.

[184] "Those who worry about the effects of interpretation will tend, if they follow Thomas, to address their worries among other places in prayer…The interpreter who prays well, of course, will find that prayer also improves the

choice in a work focused on reading in response to wounds. For some, the language of virtue has tended to be associated with the affirmation of the status quo and, therefore the oppressive forces that inflict wounds. As Luke Bretherton has argued, however, reflection on virtue can be, rather, the means "of discovering and inhabiting freedom and justice under conditions of frailty, finitude, and fallenness."[185] Lisa Tessman attends to just such conditions in her work on the possibilities of virtue for the oppressed. In this final section, then, I suggest via Tessman that understanding virtues of reading as "burdened" sheds light on what it might mean to read as someone who is injured by some aspect of the biblical text. I find that compassion names an indispensable part of such reading. I then turn back to Barth and Phyllis Trible for a picture of such compassion.

2.3.1 Burdened virtues

In *Burdened Virtues,* feminist philosopher Lisa Tessman defends the importance of virtue and personal transformation in situations of oppression. Tessman's work highlights how the reality of oppression, and resistance to it, warps the possibility of developing virtue. The virtues possible in such cases are, in her words, "burdened." Tessman's work, while concerned with social transformation, focuses on individual "*selves* who endure and resist oppression" and how "the devastating conditions confronted by these selves both limit and burden their moral goodness."[186] Tessman is keenly aware of how discourses around virtue and oppressed groups has tended to issue in denunciations of the failures of virtue among the oppressed, a way of blaming

---

interpretation, most of all, perhaps, by leaving the interests and purposes that motivate it changed." Rogers, "How the Virtues of an Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics," 81.

[185] Luke Bretherton, "Political Theology, Radical Democracy, and Virtue Ethics; or Alasdair MacIntyre and the Paradoxes of a Revolutionary Consciousness" *Political Theology:* (2021): 16.

[186] Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

them for their own suffering. But while fraught with peril, attending to the moral damage suffered by the oppressed can be a way of attending not only to the full extent of their oppression, but also a way of demonstrating how a true account of virtue requires a sense of participation in the flourishing of an entire community. For "both beneficiaries and victims of oppression…are morally damaged."[187] I cannot be good if my goodness comes at the cost of someone else's suffering.[188]

In her investigation Tessman had hoped to find evidence for an alternative set of virtues operative among the oppressed. What she found instead is that the virtues that enable effective resistance and survival under oppression "carry with them a cost to their bearer" in that they are "disjoined from the bearer's own flourishing." These are what she terms "burdened virtues."[189] Anger, for example, fuels resistance to oppression and enables leaders among the oppressed to persevere in their opposition to conditions that disempower. The "tremendous anger" necessary for such perseverance, is, however, "ultimately unhealthy or corrosive for its bearer;" it is "a morally praiseworthy trait that is at the same time bad for its bearer."[190] She profiles courage, loyalty, and empathy as well. In each case she argues that the Aristotelian virtuous mean between extremes is rendered impossible by oppression.[191] One cannot be temperately angry at extraordinary evil perpetrated against oneself, and it would indeed be blameworthy to exercise

---

[187] Ibid., 33.
[188] See her second chapter, "The Ordinary Vices of Domination," in which she develops this account, criticizes conventional Aristotelian virtue ethics as excessively individualistic, and proposes instead that "moral goodness requires a pursuit of not just my own well-being, and not just the well-being of those whose well-being I depend on, but also the well-being of those whose very lack of well-being may have been a condition of my privileges," Ibid., 76.
[189] Ibid., 4.
[190] Ibid., 124.
[191] "There is no mean state anywhere between these two extremes that is morally praiseworthy in any simple way." Ibid., 83.

"restraint" in that regard. And yet, deep and abiding anger can corrode those who rightly feel it. The very conditions of oppression damage and burden the possibility of virtue for sufferers.

Despite this gloomy account, the fraught character of the virtues under oppression captures something profoundly hopeful; the dogged pursuit of virtue, while burdened, is a testament to "something crucial about eudaimonism," that is, its "affirmation and embrace of life."[192] Tremendous anger in those who suffer and resist oppression is ordered towards life, even if it is damaging.

2.3.2 Crucified and resurrected reading

Phyllis Trible's self-reported reading experience matches parts of Tessman's descriptions. The Bible is, for her, a thoroughly androcentric book. To read it in such a way that it fosters the liberation of women is thus to struggle *against* it. For example, to read in such a way that the unnamed woman raped and dismembered in Judges 19 is the center of the story "is to interpret against the narrator, plot, other characters, and the biblical tradition because they have shown her neither compassion nor attention."[193] By reading against the grain, Trible hopes to "remember a past that the present embodies."[194] Leading the reader to see that the wounds of the text are bound up with the wounds of the present therefore stimulates them to care for these contemporary wounds. Such a reading "seeks to redeem the time."[195] It is also a picture of compassionate reading in practice: Trible seeks to suffer with the wounds of the text so that she can tend more ably to the harms around her.

---

[192] Ibid., 168.
[193] Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia, PA; Fortress Press, 1984), 86.
[194] Trible, *Texts of Terror,* 3.
[195] Ibid.

If Trible reads against the grain, it is because scripture is a truthful account of our existence. "Art imitates life, scripture likewise reflects it in both holiness and horror."[196] The horror we find in scripture matches the horror of our lives. Christian readers are often too eager to skim lightly over the top of the Bible's horror stories, confident that these tales have been resolved in the crucifixion and resurrection. Trible's reading closes off the easy rhetorical strategies that yield such tameness. Indeed, her choice of stories is already determined in large part by seeing how these stories remain close to our own world. She chose the four stories in *Texts of Terror* because of

> hearing a black woman describe herself as a daughter of Hagar outside the covenant; seeing an abused woman on the streets of New York with a sign, "My name is Tamar"; reading reports of the dismembered body of a woman found in a trash can; attending worship services in memory of nameless women; and wrestling with the silence, absence, and opposition of God.[197]

By re-reading the stories of Hagar, Tamar, and others she brings the mirror of scripture up close against the face of the present in order that we might be convicted by the injustice that comes into view. While she maintains that "sad stories do not have happy endings" Trible hopes that "they may inspire repentance," and thus "sad stories may yield new beginnings."[198]

What Trible accomplishes by these re-readings is remarkable. Texts that contain horrific violence against women—"texts of terror"—become a way for the difficulty of the biblical texts to spur repentance and solidarity. Her focus on the horrors Hagar suffers issues not simply in outrage on her behalf but a sense of responsibility for present division and oppression in which the reader participates. "All we who are heirs of Sarah and Abraham, by flesh and spirit, must

---

[196] Ibid., 2.
[197] Ibid., 1-2.
[198] Ibid., 2.

answer for the terror."[199] Her account of the rape of Tamar similarly presses the reader into acknowledging their own participation in systems that enable abuse to flourish. "Who will preserve sister wisdom from the adventurer, the rapist with his smooth words, lecherous eyes, and grasping hands? In answering the question, Israel is found wanting—*and so are we*."[200] Her narration brings the reader into a relationship of accountability with the horrors of the text so that its wounds become something they must acknowledge and tend.

In this sense, while Trible does explicitly position her work as reading against the grain of an androcentric text, her work might just as well be described as learning of the horrors of the present age through scripture. Or, as Mark James, summarizes, "learning to tell sad stories as scripture does."[201] Trible attends to horror in a way already patterned in scripture. She is drawn to suffer with those whose suffering scripture simultaneously reveals and obscures.

But this accomplishment, as in Tessman's account, is burdened. Tessman argues that the commonly understood virtues are not available in the same way to the oppressed in part because oppression renders the mean between extremes unconscionable. What is left—rightly directed rage, for example—might enable resistance at the cost of moral damage to the individual. So, too, for Trible. One of the costs of Trible's reading is the loss of the sense that the witness of the biblical texts is *for* the feminist reader, in any immediate sense. There is no mean between extremes here possible; the Bible is constructed over and against women. Trible highlights this in stark terms through an allegorical reading of Jacob wrestling with the angel.

> To tell and hear tales of terror is to wrestle demons in the night, without a compassionate God to save us….We struggle mightily, only to be wounded. But yet we

---

[199] Ibid., 28-9.
[200] Ibid., 57. Emphasis original.
[201] Mark James, "Learning the Language of Scripture: Origen, Wisdom, and Exegetical Inquiry" (PhD dissertation, University of Virginia, 2016), 312.

> hold on, seeking a blessing: the healing of wounds and the restoration of health. If the blessing comes—and we dare not claim assurance—it does not come on our terms. Indeed, as we leave the land of terror, we limp.[202]

The Bible, likened here to a demon rather than the unspecified "man" of Genesis 32, can yield a blessing, but it comes as much from the struggle *against* it as it does from any capacity of the text to speak straightforwardly as the Word of God. Instead, the Word of God speaks in and through the struggle with the text. Such a reader, like Tessman's virtuous oppressed subject, is burdened by this struggle.

Though quite different, Barth describes encountering scripture in a way that helps us read Trible's compassionate struggle explicitly and theologically as an encounter with the Word. For Barth as for Trible, scripture is a human document marked by human sin. And yet, Barth insists, the Word of God speaks not around, behind, or beyond those words, but precisely through them. This cannot help but provoke scandal; indeed for Barth it is not an overstatement to suggest that we *ought* to be offended by the Bible.

This is because the Bible is not a collection of "truths" of revelation which, once established, enable us to develop a coherent worldview. It is not a deposit of information about the way the world is. It is "not a book of oracles." It is, rather, "a genuine witness."[203] Through its humanity, through its fallibility, through its weakness, the Word of God is made present. This is a miracle that encompasses the history of Israel, the apostolic witnesses, the process of canonization, the history of reception, and the moment of reading, preaching, and hearing all as one continuous act of God befriending humanity. But it is not a miracle we control. The miracle

---

[202] Ibid., 5.
[203] Barth, *CD* I/2, 507.

"is not simply before us because the Bible is before us."[204] All we can do is wait for the miracle as we set the Bible before us and continually encounter the scandal of its humanity.

> We can establish lacunae, inconsistencies and over-emphases. We may be alienated by a figure like that of Moses. We may quarrel with James or with Paul. We may have to admit that we can make little or nothing of large tracts of the Bible…We can take offence at the Bible. And in the light of the claim or the assertion that the Bible is the Word of God—granting that the miracle of faith and the Word does not intervene—we are bound to take offence at it.[205]

To take the Bible seriously as a witness of the Word of God, which truly becomes for us the Word of God, we must be scandalized by its fallible humanity. It would dishonor the Word not to react so. If we are not scandalized, "we have not yet realized the importance of that claim"—the claim that the Bible is the indispensable witness to the Word of God.[206] Compassionate reading, and indeed reading that takes seriously the Bible's indirect identity with the Word, often requires that the Bible truly be felt as a scandal.

And, as we wait on this fallible human word, the miracle of inspiration may greet us again and again—but always as a gratuitous offering beyond our power to make it present. The "hiddenness, the servant form, the offence" of the Bible is "not an obstacle for God" but rather precisely how God is "free for us."[207] In the moment when the fallible human word of scripture becomes for us the Word of God "there takes place for us the movement which Holy Scripture calls revelation."[208]

Barth gives us a way of speaking Christologically of both the pain and blessing that Trible's exegesis brings about. The Bible truly scandalizes, not only in the sense that it humbles

---

[204] Ibid.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid., 65.
[208] Ibid., 65.

pride, but also in the sense that in it we are sometimes truly confronted with a *human* word that *rightly* scandalizes. Here is truly a fallible human word, and not to meet it as such is not to take the miracle of revelation seriously. Trible is of course entirely correct to feel the wound of patriarchy in her reading—to feel it any less, or to struggle with it any less fiercely would be to believe the Word of God incapable of making witnesses out of the human authors of scripture. And to make witnesses out of us. Not to feel Hagar's diminution in the text would be to fundamentally mistake what scripture is. But as Trible wrestles with these texts of terror a genuine encounter with the Word can emerge, by grace. Here Barth's theological language adds an element to Trible's description: in wrestling with scripture, we may truly meet not merely a "demon," but the Word. The blessings come not simply from what we learn through struggle, as if we ourselves were the only sources of meaning. Rather, in the struggle God comes to us in freedom for blessing.

For her part, Trible adds to Barth's account the reality and seriousness of the Bible's "scandal." It is not merely a matter of intellectual embarrassment that confronts us in the Bible as we seek to take it seriously as the Word of God. Rather it is the knowledge that these words have facilitated harm. For Trible, the Bible meets us as a word that has wounded women and given fodder to systems of patriarchal domination under which women have been victimized. Trible describes how the feminist interpreter walks away from wrestling with the text still limping. In Barth's description it sometimes sounds as though the miracle by which the Word meets us in the text erases all past pain, all prior offense we had taken at the Bible. Such moments of resolution during our time will be fleeting, proleptic snatches of the eschatological harmony. The wounds linger and require tending, again and again. Christians stand with Thomas still, hands at Jesus' side.

Conclusion

Scripture is wounded because in it the Word comes to be made present through sinful and limited human words that cannot bear the weight of divine perfection. Though real, such wounds cannot be specified textually for all times and places, but only in relation to specific communities of reading suffering particular traumas. All these wounds are a distant echo of, and rooted in, the wounds of Christ on the cross. Being wounded in this way may become one path to the heart of what it means to read scripture well. To be sure, being wounded as one reads scripture may become a narcissistic activity—wounds can fester for all sorts of reasons, pride not least among them. But it may also be a mode of conformity to Christ if in reading, Christians are drawn into and joined with the wounds of those suffering in the present. To read in such way is to read with compassion in its fullest sense—to suffer with Christ, who was wounded through identification with the wounded words and worlds of humanity.

If being drawn into the wounds of reading joins Christians to Christ's suffering, it joins them also to his resurrection. But unlike Christ, this happens not once and for all, but repeatedly; participation is always fleeting and partial. To read scripture well is to die and rise with Christ over and over again. Doing so requires the long and slow work of acquiring wisdom. The burdens and promise of this task are visible in the life of Anna Jansz, first of three case studies, to whom we now turn.

Chapter 3

Tending the Gap: Scriptural Apocalypticism and the Wisdom of Anna Jansz

During its brief existence from 1534 to 1535, the Anabaptist kingdom of Münster minted coins bearing the phrase "The Word became flesh."[209] The coins declared that here at Münster God's reign had finally arrived and would envelop the whole earth, transforming corruption and injustice into peace. It is a bitter and ironic motto. "The Word became flesh"—as the city authorities expelled or executed those who refused rebaptism. "The Word became flesh"—as town leaders forced women into polygamous marriages. On human lips the deepest truths of scripture may become lies. The Word became flesh, but not at Münster.

I begin this dissertation's historical case studies at Münster for two reasons. First, I am an Anabaptist, and the problems of Münster are my own. Though thoroughly repudiated by the continuing stream of sixteenth century Anabaptism, the episode at Münster nonetheless captures something troubling about my own tradition. While rarely replicating Münster's drama, Anabaptists have time and again sought to enact the promises of scripture directly. Münster is the founding example of the danger characteristic of this impulse. It is not a danger we have left behind. As I indicated in the introduction, my own theological education passed through the work of John Howard Yoder, who rationalized his sexual abuse as an experiment in uncompromising

---

[209] For a brief description and picture, see Hermann von Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness* translated by Christopher Mackay, (Boston: Brill, 2007), 70-71. For an overview, see Victor Wiebe, "Anabaptist Coinage and Commemorative Medals," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. September 2015. See also Marion Kobelt-Groch, translated by Linda Huebert-Hecht, "Hille Feicken of Sneek" in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: 16th Century Reforming Pioneers*, edited by C. Arnold Snyder and Linda Huebert Hecht (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Lauerier University Press, 1996), 291.

discipleship and obedience to the commands and promises of the gospels. His legacy of abuse is the most formative trauma within Anabaptist theological circles in the last half-century.[210] How may Anabaptists remember failures like Yoder and Münster well? When we claim scripture's promises as our own, how can we ensure we do not end in similar failure?

This last question of how to proclaim the promises of scripture truthfully and well is at the heart not simply of my tradition, but of the broader Christian struggle to live faithfully with scripture. At Münster, a gap loomed wide between scripture enlivened by the Spirit and scripture voiced by vicious caprice. But, as I detail in this chapter, such a gap exists not only in apocalyptic movements like Münster but also in the everyday encounters of Christians with scripture. Indeed, my fifth chapter will detail Elias Chacour's initial sense that the Beatitudes were promises that had failed. When scripture seems to promise its readers something that then fails to come about, it creates a painful dissonance. Such failure cannot be reduced merely to interpretive misapprehension of scriptural truth. Rather it names a struggle at the heart of scripture itself: the gap between divine promise and present reality.

The second reason I begin my case studies with Münster, then, is that it allows me to trace perhaps the most ordinary and paradigmatic of difficulties that readers encounter as they map their lives onto the patterns and pledges of the Bible: how may the promises of scripture be claimed truthfully and not destructively? This chapter frames that question through an examination of the scriptural apocalypticism of a single life, that of Anna Jansz—an Anabaptist martyr on the fringes of the Münster movement. In what follows I first contextualize Jansz in

---

[210] As Mennonite theologian Malinda Berry writes, "John Howard Yoder is our collective, metaphorical unremoved shrapnel. How we remove it is just as important as understanding how the injury occurred and why we have lived with the embedded fragments for so long." "Avoiding Avoidance," *Mennonite Life,* (summer 2014) accessed at <https://www.ambs.edu/publishing/blog/715822/avoiding-avoidance>

relation to Münsterite Anabaptism. Next I detail Jansz's life and brief writings, including her early apocalyptic "Trumpet Song," a letter to the charismatic leader David Joris, and her final *Testament*. I move then to the entanglement of Jansz's wounds with scripture's wounds and conclude with reflections on martyrdom and the ethics of memory.

Jansz's life displays with clarity the difficulty of speaking scripture's promises well. Jansz initially weaves apocalyptic hope out of the words of scripture. When her hopes fail, she voices her sorrow using those same words and articulates a different hope that must take the form of patient endurance. She can do this because she finds in scripture the same difficulties she has suffered. Scripture becomes not only the language through which she finds herself wounded by a loss of hope, but also that which names that loss and offers it as prayer. Voicing scripture's promises wisely required Anna Jansz to tend scripture's wounds, along with her own.

Jansz's life and writings suggest that no universal interpretive procedure can resolve these difficulties. The dilemmas of scriptural apocalypticism cannot be entirely evaded, for they name the heart of Christian hope. Instead, tending the gap between divine promise and human reality can, with difficulty, lead readers to develop the practical wisdom that allows them to voice scripture—and remember the martyrs—well. Under the discipline of hope this pain may be not only a stumbling block but also a speed bump encouraging the slow and careful ways of wisdom.

3.1 'A Holy Realm Will Arise:' Münster and Sixteenth-Century Apocalypticism

For nearly five hundred years, three cages have hung from the spire of St. Lambert's Church in Münster, Germany. At first, they held the rotting remains of three leaders of the Anabaptist revolution crushed there in 1535. Yet even after those were removed decades later, the city authorities left the cages up as a warning. They have even refurbished them every few

centuries—most recently, in a subtle recontextualization, setting a lightbulb in each cage to memorialize the dead Anabaptists. The cages imply that the rebellion at Münster was an aberration, an isolated occurrence that can be blamed on their occupants. Historians of apocalypticism have tended to treat Münster this way. So too, have Anabaptist chroniclers, eager to excise Münster from the body of true Anabaptists. Münster has become a shorthand for what goes wrong when apocalyptic faith and political power come together. However, the siege of Münster is more than a straightforward account of the dangers of apocalypticism: it is a complex story of accelerating crises fed by external force and internal radicalization. In this section I lay out the background of Anabaptist apocalypticism and the uprising at Münster. Münster, I argue, demonstrates a complex mix of economic and political injustice, instability, and religious fanaticism. What ended as a horrific cult of personality began as a popular reform movement with roots in real grievances against the social, economic, and religious, order. The fervent hope, disappointment, and patience of Anna Jansz's life emerges against this backdrop.

3.1.1 Anabaptist apocalypticism in sixteenth-century context

Anabaptists were hardly unique in their attempts to discern the imminent movement of God's judgment in history. Apocalyptic expectation abounded in sixteenth-century Europe, particularly among the reformers.[211] Many of Luther's followers considered him a "second Elijah." Philip Melanchthon was the most enthusiastic of these, though surprisingly the outsider Ulrich Zwingli was the first, in 1520, to give him the designation.[212] Luther himself was consistently convinced that the Last Days were at hand—though he advised against positing

[211] "The view that they were living through the Last Days was shared by virtually all the reformers." Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell. *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine, and Death in Reformation Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 13.
[212] Ibid., 24.

specific dates.[213] Moreover, his characterization of the papacy as antichrist resonates with the language that Münsterites like Bernhard Rothmann would use of the ruling powers (both Catholic and Protestant) who were their enemies. The Roman Catholic church, which tended to be less hospitable to millenarian and apocalyptic thought, saw enough evidence in its midst to prompt the Fifth Lateran Council to forbid preaching on the imminence of the arrival of Antichrist.[214]

Among Anabaptists, apocalyptic expectation was even more intense. In the early years especially, north German and Dutch Anabaptism tended toward charismatic expression and apocalyptic expectation. Even among the Swiss Anabaptists the language of imminent judgment pervaded church discourse.[215] In the 1520s the South German Anabaptist book seller Hans Hut began calculating specific dates on which Christ might return, initially positing Pentecost 1528.[216] The city authorities of Augsburg captured, tortured, and executed him in December 1527 for preaching rebaptism. Taking up Hut's mantle, Melchior Hoffman soon emerged as the most important figure in early Anabaptist apocalypticism. Building on the dispensationalist approach of the medieval Franciscan Joachim of Fiore and Hut's earlier predictions, Hoffman concluded that the period from 1526-1533 would mark the beginning of the end times. During that time, he foretold, the true church would gather at Strasbourg.[217] Though he would suffer life imprisonment, visionary Anabaptists gathered around him and competing depictions of the imminent end would continue to swirl until they culminated in Münster.

---

[213] In a 1522 sermon he wrote "the Last Day is not far off" while in 1546 just before his death, he wrote of himself and the reforming movement as "the last trumpet" to come before the return of Christ. Quoted in Cunningham and Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,* 26.
[214] Cunningham and Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,*1.
[215] Michael Sattler wrote in a letter to a church at Horb, Germany: "The abomination of desolation is visible among you. The elect servants and maidservants will be marked on the forehead…the day of the Lord must no longer tarry." *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* translated and edited by John Howard Yoder (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 61.
[216] See Walter Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages: Apocalyptic Expectation in the Radical Reformation* (New York: University Press of America, 1992), 26.
[217] Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages,* 27.

Although Münster was an outlier, it was not unique. The apocalypticism of Münster was notable not so much because of what inspired it, but who performed it. For the Catholic imperial forces and emerging Protestant authorities alike within the Holy Roman Empire, Anabaptism threatened a rejection of the entire social order. In his classic account of the radical reformation, George Williams argued that what unified disparate groups in the radical reformation was their preference not for *reform* of the existing ecclesial and social structures, but wholesale *restitution* of an earlier perfection—that of the early church.[218] Even among pacifist Anabaptists, rejection of infant baptism symbolized—for them and the state authorities alike—a rejection of the social order. When the Anabaptists won the Münster city council elections in 1534 and began to compel rebaptism for the city inhabitants it was not analogous to a declaration of Lutheran or Calvinist sympathies, it was secession from the existing structure of society.

3.1.2 Münster: revolution and siege

The revolution[219] at Münster emerged organically out of a marriage between Melchiorite Anabaptist charismatic tendencies and the practical necessities of Münster's civic reformation. Tensions between newly appointed Prince-Bishop Franz von Waldeck, overlord of Münster, and the town's economic, religious, and political leaders grew throughout the early 1530s. Indeed, violent conflict began before the introduction of Anabaptism in the city. Economically, guild authorities protested the tax-free status of monasteries that operated the city's small but growing

---

[218] "The reformers among the Old Believers and the Magisterial Reformers alike worked with the idea of *reformation;* the Anabaptists, the Spiritualists, and the Rationalists labored under the more radical slogan of *restitution.*" George Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Kirksville, MO, Truman State University Press, 2000) first edition, Xxxi.

[219] Though "revolution" may be a somewhat anachronistic term, Ralf Klötzer makes an effective case that it most aptly describes what took place in Münster, "in the sense of a rapid, fundamental and extensive transformation of the socio-political structure on the basis of a specific development within an urban Reformation." Ralf Klötzer, "The Melchiorites and Münster" in ed. John Roth and James Stayer, *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism: 1521-1700* (Boston: Brill Academic Press, 2007), 219.

textiles factories.[220] This fed an anticlericalism that ignited around the issue of who would be allowed to preach in the city's parish churches. Though a Catholic bishop, Waldeck was himself quite sympathetic to Lutheranism. But in 1532 the town council authorized Protestant ministers to preach in the city's churches and, fearing a loss of control, von Waldeck initiated an economic blockade of the city and confiscated a large herd of cattle.[221] The town militia carried out a surprise counterattack and further violence was only averted through the intervention of the neighboring Lutheran Landgrave Philip of Hesse who brokered a treaty in early 1533 by which the town could appoint its own ministers to parish churches but not cathedrals and monasteries.[222] From this point the reformation in Münster might have proceeded much as it did elsewhere in northern Germany, with the city authorities coming to further accommodations with von Waldeck and perhaps von Waldeck's own conversion to Lutheranism.

It was not to be. The chief reformer in the city, Bernhard Rothmann, was not inclined to Lutheranism, despite its dominance in the surrounding areas. Rothmann's embrace of adult baptism, combined with support from town notables, brought on several crises within and between the United Guild authorities and the town council. After first forbidding Rothmann's preaching, the town council eventually agreed on a policy of toleration on the disputed question of infant and adult baptism. The threat of forced re-Catholicization heightened these crises. Upon hearing of these events, von Waldeck had once again approached the city with an army to put it to siege.[223] This is the moment—late 1533 and early 1534—when apocalypticism began to grip the

---

[220] Klötzer, "The Melchiorites and Münster," 224.
[221] Ibid., 226.
[222] Ibid.
[223] James Stayer, *The German Peasants' War and the Anabaptist Community of Goods,* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press: 1991), 125. Stayer summarizes the event in this way, "a body of civic-minded notables of high social

city. Signs and portents were seen in the sky. A 16 year-old girl preached for hours outside the home of a prominent Anabaptist, calling for the city to repent and be rebaptized.[224]

In this atmosphere of urban unrest, outside threats, and conflicts over religious identity, the Anabaptists decisively won the city council elections of February 23, 1534 and events spiraled out of control. Jan Matthys, a prophet and follower of the Anabaptist leader Melchior Hoffmann, proclaimed that Münster was the New Jerusalem and immigrated to the city, urging his followers to do the same.[225] This prompted Anabaptist migration to Münster from surrounding areas as well as out-migration of non-Anabaptist Protestant Münsterites and its few remaining Catholics. Soon the forces of Waldeck completely encircled the city and besieged it until it fell a year later on June 23, 1535. During that time, the prophet Jan Matthys would effectively assume control of the city and, inspired by his prediction of Christ's return at Easter, die in a suicidal raid outside Münster's walls. Jan van Leiden, a Dutch tailor, took over his charismatic authority in the ensuing power vacuum and declared himself king, eliminating the town's traditional civic governance structures. Even before Jan van Leiden took power, the city authorities had begun enacting wartime measures designed both to maintain social control and turn Münster into a model of biblical community. The most infamous of these measures were the forced collectivization of private property and enactment of polygamy, a measure which made marriage compulsory for unmarried women.[226]

---

standing reluctantly sided with the Anabaptists as the only means to preserve the endangered religious and political freedoms of their town," 127.

[224] Hermann von Kerssenbrock, *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness* translated by Christopher Mackay, (Boston, Brill, 2007), 124, page 182.

[225] Stayer, *The German Peasants' War and the Anabaptist Community of Goods,* 127.

[226] Among contemporary historians, the most lucid account of the siege is Rolf Klötzter's.

One episode from near the conclusion of the siege illuminates the gender dynamics of this revolution. A Dutch Anabaptist woman named Hille Feicken who had migrated to Münster to join the revolution took it upon herself to sneak out of the city and assassinate Franz von Waldeck, attempting explicitly to re-enact the story of the slaying of Holofernes in the book of Judith.[227] Her effort failed and she was executed, but the ensuing interrogation revealed her unhappiness with the Anabaptist leadership of Münster, demonstrating a current of opposition to the policies of Jan van Leiden that nevertheless did not reject the whole millenarian project.

3.1.3 Anabaptism and the role of women in the wake of Münster

Anabaptism has been formed by the memory of Münster. The Anabaptism that would come to be defined by pacifism took shape most definitively in the aftermath of Münster, as rival Anabaptist groups tried to make sense of the failed revolution and articulate an alternative vision around which to cohere. From the beginning of Anabaptism nonviolence was a fundamental principle for some, especially Swiss Anabaptists as evidenced by the *Schleitheim Confession* of 1527. But in the long aftermath of Münster, it established a much firmer hold as Dutch and North German Anabaptists distinguished themselves from what had taken place there. Menno Simons led that development. Originally a Catholic priest in Friesland, Simons abandoned his position and became an Anabaptist leader. His leadership filled the chaotic vortex among Dutch Anabaptists in the late 1530s and 1540s and beyond. Thus the Anabaptism that matured through the later sixteenth-century in the Netherlands came to bear his name. These were not *Münsterites*, but *Mennonites*.

---

[227] For a detailed account, see Marion Kobelt-Groch, "Hille Feicken of Sneek," translated by Linda Huebert Hecht, in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women*, 288-297.

This transition also heralded a shift in the gendered realities of Anabaptism. The instabilities of the early charismatic and visionary strain of Anabaptism had allowed for a relatively high level of women's involvement in positions of power. At the head of Melchior Hoffman's charismatic movement in Strasbourg in the 1520s and 1530s, for example, there were eighteen male visionaries and eight female.[228] After Hoffman's death when a rival Anabaptist leader named David Joris sought to assimilate the Strasbourg group into his own, it was a woman, Barbara Rebstock, who led the group's rejection of Joris' leadership.[229] As Sigrun Haude summarizes, women visionaries "were in a position to experience more freedom" through their direction connection to God, but, she qualifies, "this position was always held in check by men's claims to hold the sole keys to the mysteries of the faith."[230] However, after Münster a more rigid biblicism came to overwhelm the early spiritualism of the movement, and this change diminished women's leadership possibilities. Scholars of gender and sixteenth-century Anabaptism have followed Max Weber's "early-late" model of gender and organization in emerging religious movements. For the most part, Anabaptism seems to confirm Weber's hypothesis: women's leadership declined as the process of organizational formalization routinized male authority and closed off the possibility of pneumatic expressions outside traditional gender restrictions. And yet, the climactic event of charismatic and apocalyptic Anabaptism—the revolution at Münster—would itself be profoundly misogynistic, rendering any simple story of early and late women's participation ambiguous.

---

[228] Sigrun Haude "Gender Roles and Perspectives Among Anabaptists and Spiritualist Groups" in ed. John Roth and James Stayer *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism 1521-1700,* 434.
[229] Haude, "Gender Roles and Perspectives Among Anabaptists and Spiritualist Groups," 435.
[230] Ibid., 436.

As a hymnodist, charismatic, and martyr, Anna Jansz's life would demonstrate the possibilities and limits of women's participation in early Anabaptism. In the same way, her life speaks also to the possibilities and limits of hope for broader social and political transformation in early Anabaptism. After all, what ended as a horrific cult of personality in Münster had begun as a popular reform movement with roots in real grievances against the social, economic, and religious order. Jansz's own hope, disappointment, and patience emerge against this backdrop.

3.1.4 Remembering Münster

For the contemporary biblical scholar Christopher Rowland, Münster was "the best example of the intertwining of the Apocalypse and violence in Christian history."[231] This narration of Münster as a paradigm case of apocalyptic zealotry was cemented in modern times by Norman Cohn's depiction of Münster in *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, the most influential modern account of medieval and early modern apocalypticism in Europe. Millenarian movements, as Cohn describes them, are defined both by the inherent instability of the texts they draw on, and the cleverness of their leaders in preying on populations susceptible to their message. Cohn emphasizes that the seeds of later apocalyptic and millennial movements are present in Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic writings. "All these prophecies were devices by which religious groups, at first Jewish and later Christian, consoled, fortified, and asserted themselves when confronted by the threat or the reality of oppression."[232] Such writings presage

---

[231] Christopher Rowland, ''Apocalypse and Violence: The Evidence from the Reception History of the Book of Revelation,'' in *Apocalypse and Violence*, ed. Abbas Amanat and John J. Collins (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 2004), 4.
[232] Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 19.

the format of later apocalyptic movements, even if, for Cohn, they initially succeed in providing hope to their readers.

For Cohn, the apocalyptic movements of the Middle Ages and Early Modern Europe all proceeded in the same way. In each case, some kind of "mass insurrection" would be "directed towards limited and realistic aims."[233] Then "there would appear, somewhere on the radical fringe, a prophet with his following of paupers, intent on turning this one upheaval into the apocalyptic battle, the final purification of the world."[234] This would be someone who had been "obsessed with eschatological phanstasies [*sic*]" long before, and he would use "the most varied materials—the Book of Daniel, the Book of Revelation, the Sibylline Oracles…all of them elaborated and reinterpreted and vulgarized."[235] What emerged then was "a new group…obsessed by the apocalyptic fantasy and filled with the conviction of its own infallibility."[236] The final ingredient, for Cohn, is an "unorganized, atomized population" of the "rootless poor"—perhaps newly urbanized, who have been subjected to economic precarity while their traditional social structures have broken down, perhaps through urbanization.[237] For Cohn this describes not only historical millenarianism, but the "left-wing revolutions and revolutionary movements" of the twentieth century.[238] Though historically distinct realities, Cohn's analysis of apocalypticism resembles Hannah Arendt's argument about the origins of totalitarianism; for both authors, social atomization paves the way for extremism.[239]

---

[233] Ibid., 284.
[234] Ibid.
[235] Ibid., 285, 281.
[236] Ibid,, 285.
[237] Ibid., 282.
[238] Ibid., 285.
[239] For Arendt "What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday

However, aside from this emphasis on social dislocation, Cohn's argument is largely unconcerned with political economy. For Cohn and other interpreters of apocalypticism, millenarian movements represent a dangerous aberration, a virus that can take hold anywhere that the right kind of leader and interpretive sensibility combines with social atomization; it does not develop naturally from a set of local conditions. Whether construed textually, as a group of inherently dangerous text, or interpretively, as a hermeneutical pattern of reasoning that yields violent results,[240] or socially, as a pattern of leadership, in all cases Cohn and others argue that apocalypticism represents a dangerous hermeneutical force alien to the natural course of events.

Many American Anabaptist historians have themselves followed this line of interpretation, writing Münster out of the history of Anabaptism as an aberration. As a new generation of Mennonite leaders in the early 1900s sought to create denominational institutions that would allow them to integrate into the North American religious landscape, they developed a theological history of Anabaptist as, in essence, a precursor to the American separation of church and state.[241] Anabaptism, for this generation of leaders, needed to be an originally cohesive movement that did not include the excesses of Münster. In the early pages of the newly established *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, the Mennonite historian John Horsch, wrote that it was

---

experience of the ever growing masses of our century." *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1973), 478.

[240] For Christopher Rowland, for example, "there is often a particular hermeneutical move in which actualizing the text takes place" though "actualization did not always lead to violence," *Apocalypse and Violence*, 12-13.

[241] Given voice most decisively by Harold Bender's *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944). This was initially his 1942 presidential address to the American Society of Church History. In it, Bender both accounts for an essential Anabaptist distinctive—framed as discipleship—while also positioning it as distinctly American. "The great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and voluntarism in religion, so basic in American Protestantism and so essential to democracy, ultimately are derived from the Anabaptists of the Reformation period." 4.

"permissible to use the designation 'Anabaptist movement' with reference to the evangelical Anabaptists only, leaving out of consideration the corrupt sects and other Anabaptist sects which had only a short history"—not even daring to speak the name "Münster."[242] Since then, Anabaptist historiography has accommodated more internal diversity in its accounting of sixteenth-century origins (shifting from an account of a single beginning in Zurich to acknowledgement of multiple simultaneous origins in South Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland) but precisely how closely to link Münster with other Anabaptist movements and leaders remains disputed.

In the historical accounts of the modern political left, by contrast, political economy has been foreground and Münster has often been treated as heroic anticipation of economic egalitarianism, but with little accounting of its self-destruction. For Friedrich Engels, Anabaptists were symptoms of the class conflict inherent in the death of feudalism and emergence of capitalism. "Having no definite dogmas," they were "held together by common opposition against all ruling classes," he writes.[243] In this role, however, they were important ingredients in revolutionary movements, including most importantly Thomas Müntzer's peasants' movements. Because of the Anabaptists, Müntzer "found the ground prepared wherever he turned."[244] Ernst Bloch read Anabaptists similarly.[245] For Karl Kautsky, an influential expositor of Marxism after the death of Marx and Engels, Anabaptism and associated movements represented "the birth of

---

[242] John Horsch, "Is Dr. Kuehler's Conception of Early Dutch Anabaptism Historically Sound?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 7/1 (January 1933), 52. For a critical response a half-century later, see James Stayer's "Was Dr. Kuehler's Conception of Early Dutch Anabaptism Historically Sound? Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Münster 450 Years Later," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 60/3 (July 1986).
[243] Friedrich Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, translated by Moissaye J. Olgin (London 1850), 40.
[244] Engels, *The Peasant War in Germany*, 40.
[245] Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Müntzer als Theologe der Revolution*, 1921.

modern socialism."[246] He devoted significant space in his historical work to a detailed account of Münster as a class-based revolution. More romantically, the left-wing memory of Münster has been kept alive in the contemporary historical novel *Q*, written by a group of Italian anarchists, which recalls Münster as one in a perennial series of sabotaged efforts to transform human society.[247]

More recently, several historians have together sought to portray Münster as, in essence, a magisterial Anabaptist Reformation whose most extreme expressions are primarily explained by wartime conditions. James Stayer, for example, argues that the communism instituted by Jan van Leiden was essentially a form of siege rationing.[248] Likewise for Stayer, the polygamy enacted at the same time served to organize the dramatic gender imbalance in the city— during the siege women outnumbered men three to one.[249] As Michael Driedger writes, "the baptist cause in Münster was a religion of the besieged, and the violence of the siege armies should never be minimized or forgotten."[250] In this interpretation the excesses of Münster result mostly from external violence.

Rolf Klötzer's narration best captures the depth of the excesses of the Anabaptist leaders in Münster while also contextualizing these developments within the religious, economic, and

---

[246] Münster and revolutionary Protestantism more broadly saw "the birth of a new system of production, the modern State and the modern proletariat; and it saw also the birth of modern socialism." Karl Kautsky, translated by J.L. & E.G. Mulliken. *Communism in Central Europe at the Time of the Reformation,* accessed at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1897/europe/index.htm>

[247] Luther Blissett, *Q,* translated by Shaun Whiteside, (New York: Harcourt, 2000). For a reflection on *Q* and the historiography of early Anabaptism, see Jeremy Garber, "Reading the Anabaptists: Anabaptist Historiography and Luther Blissett's *Q," Conrad Grebel Review* 24/1 (Winter 2006).

[248] James Stayer, *The German Peasants' War and the Anabaptist Community of Goods,* 130.

[249] "Münsterite polygamy…amounted in practice to nothing more than the regulating of the female majority according the prescriptions of biblical misogyny." Ibid.

[250] Michael Driedger, "Thinking Inside the Cages: Norman Cohn, Anabaptist Münster, and Polemically Inspired Assumptions about Apocalyptic Violence," *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions,* 21/4 (2018): 48.

political exigencies of the civic reformation there. He describes the events of Münster as driven not only by apocalypticism but also by the progress of a civic Reformation which became oriented toward adult baptism. All the events that unfolded naturally from this development pushed Münster toward apocalypticism. "The expectation of Christ's return was not the cause of a community-oriented radical reformation, but rather a reinforcing factor."[251] In other words, first came the reformation—with its unique orientation toward Anabaptism, then came the siege with its intensifying effects, and after this came the fully apocalyptic leadership of Jan van Leiden.[252] When combined with an awareness of the genuine political, economic, and religious concerns of reformers in Münster, this narration best captures the complex dynamics at its heart: the Münster movement *both* reacted to real injustice *and* produced further injustice. As the life of Anna Jansz will make clear, both halves of this complex dual reality emerged from scripturally suffused hope.

Finally, this brief historiographic survey demonstrates the difficulty of remembering failure well. It is not always easy to remember extraordinary past events as anything other than a confirmation of one's views. For Anabaptists, the challenge is to remember Münster as a real failure of Anabaptism, not merely an aberrant departure from purity. For church historians more broadly, the challenge is how to tell the story in a way that implicates multiple actors and situates Münster in the dynamics of Reformation-era Europe at the time, not just the extremes of a zealous few Anabaptists. The life of Anna Jansz and the memorialization of her death renders these challenges of memory distinct and pressing.

---

[251] Klötzer, "The Melchiorites and Münster," 219.
[252] "The Anabaptist regime should be understood as a revolution, in the sense of a rapid, fundamental and extensive transformation of the socio-political structure on the basis of a specific development within an urban Reformation." Rolf Klötzer, "The Melchiorites and Münster," *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism,* 219.

3.2 A Life in Three Moments: Anna Jansz

Anna Jansz was born around 1510 in the Netherlands and was drowned in 1539 for being rebaptized. She surfaces in the written historical record at three moments, several years apart. These three textual traces are her apocalyptic "Trumpet Song" written around 1534, then her letter to the Anabaptist leader David Joris probably written in 1538, and finally her placid *Testament,* written to her son in the days before her execution in 1539. Historians have struggled to harmonize these moments. How can the Anna Jansz who ends her life as a paragon of pacifist Anabaptist martyrdom be the same Anna Jansz of militantly apocalyptic hymnody? The textual evidence allows for multiple answers, and my own interpretation is tentative and provisional. My goal in what follows is to linger with each of these three moments to show how Anna Jansz both expresses and reformulates her apocalypticism in terms of scripture. I argue that Jansz's life is a story of ambiguous but real progress as she develops practical wisdom. She is not a straightforward exemplar of virtue; rather she demonstrates the difficulty and pain that often accompanies growth in interpretive prudence.

3.2.1 Song

The first of these moments glimpses Anna Jansz as a revolutionary hymnodist. Jansz was born into a family of some means in Briel, the Netherlands. When she was 22 or 23, an Anabaptist named Meynaart van Emden rebaptized her along with her husband Arent in early 1534.[253] Van Emden had close ties to the Anabaptists who were at that moment coming to power in Münster. Van Emden assisted the Münsterites by inciting Anabaptist uprisings in Amsterdam

[253] Werner Packull, "Anna Jansz of Rotterdam" in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women,* 337. Packull's is the best biographical account of Jansz.

and throughout the Netherlands. Because of this, Amsterdam city authorities imprisoned him just after he baptized Jansz and her husband, though he immediately broke out and continued his efforts.[254] Whatever else her rebaptism meant to her, it likely included some anticipation of a radical reordering of the society around her, given the identity of her baptizer and the timing of her baptism.[255]

The "Trumpet Song" of Anna Jansz, which was written around the time of her baptism, expresses these apocalyptic themes. The song came to be an anthem of the revolutionary Anabaptism that was cresting just then in Münster.[256] Scripture suffuses the language of the song. Indeed, it is a verbal collage of biblical texts. In the current modern version, editors list 30 scriptural references or quotations (mostly from the book of Revelation, Ezekiel, the Gospels, and the Apocrypha). Images of harvest, feasting, and destruction combine into a description of the judgment God will bring to the earth.

Over the course of thirteen verses she extols this impending divine judgment on the rich and corrupt. It begins gently, with no sign yet of war.

> I hear the Trumpet sounding,
> From far off I hear her blast!
> In Jerusalem, Edom, in Bashan,
> The heralds cry high and low,
> To me their sound brings this to mind:
> 'Prepare yourselves for the wedding feast,
> All you who love the King!
> The Gate is open, enter in!

---

[254] Packull, "Anna Jansz of Rotterdam," in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women,* 337.
[255] "Seen in the above context, Anna's baptism by Meynaart during February or March of 1534 must have meant more than a commitment to a holy life of discipleship. It took place in the long shadow of events in Münster, in an atmosphere charged with apocalyptic expectations." Ibid., 337.
[256] A Dutch historian has called it the "Marseillaise" of Dutch Anabaptism. A.F. Mellink, *De Wederdopers in de Noordelijke Nederlanden, 1531-1544* (Gronigen: J.B. Wolters, 1954), 225-26. Quoted in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women,* 336.

Adorn yourselves, don your Wedding finery!'[257]

The second stanza encourages "Zion, God's special chosen," to "accept the Word of the Lord" and come with haste to this wedding feast "before you with Babylon together are slain." The third stanza notes how the elect will be "marked" with a special sign. The "sign of Thau" was a mystical idea coming from Ezekiel 9:4 that was diversely appropriated by sixteenth-century Anabaptists to indicate a "mark of distinction granted to the end-time elect."[258] "Conclude the list of the transfigured!" Jansz continues, for their "number will soon be complete."

Next Jansz lays out the kind of election to which "Zion" is called. "Gird your loins / Prepare yourself for battle!" (4). Exactly what kind of battle the elect will give remains unclear through the rest of the song. "You must set out on that narrow path. / A single footstep is its width./ Its entrance lies in humbling yourself." The tension between humility and giving battle stands unresolved.

The middle stanzas of the song describe the coming judgment. The wedding feast is imminent. "The dragon has come upon the earth….But be of good cheer and doubt ye not! / Our Guide will soon come to judge" (6). Now the wedding feast seems to be taking place inside a city, for Jansz enjoins her listeners—the "watchers on the gates of Zion"—to enter the city with haste. "The Keeper goes to close the gates, And you will be left outside, excluded" (8). A wave of destruction sweeps the countryside—though who is performing it remains underdetermined. Speaking to the authorities, she asks

---

[257] Anna Jansz, "Trumpet Song," in *Elisabeth's Manly Courage*: *Testimonials and Songs of Martyred Anabaptist Women in the Low Countries,* edited and translated by Hermina Joldersma and Louis Grijp. (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2000), 59. All other quotations from Jansz's Trumpet Song are taken from here and will be reference by stanza or cited parenthetically by stanza.

[258] Werner Packull, "The Sign of Thau: The Changing Conception of the Seal of God's Elect in Early Anabaptist Thought," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61/4 (October 1987), 374. Packull notes the possible origin of this tradition among the Franciscans.

O Murderous seed, what will you do?
Offspring of Cain, you put to death
the Lambs of the Lord, without just cause -
It will be doubly repaid to you! (9)

Judgment is imminent. “Death now comes riding on horseback” and “the Sword is passing over the land with which you”—the offspring of Cain—“will be killed.” And, most chillingly, she concludes,

The time has now come to reap,
For evil has gained the upper hand.
There’s hardly a space for the sowing,
For weeds have engulfed the entire Land….
Whet your scythes, the Harvest is ripe! (10)

If until now the gathering of the elect has been a peaceful affair, Jansz here sees rivers of blood, a “feast for carrion birds” who will “feed on the flesh of the rulers.” The sense of the hymn in stanza 10 is of the elect participating in the bloodbath of their enemies. They will conduct the harvest and tread out the grapes. But in the final three stanzas the agency of the chosen people diminishes. Here it is not the elect, but God who will prepare this feast of blood.

Now rejoice and be exultant,
Play on your Harps a new song!
In our God be jubilant
All of you who witness this revenge!
The Lord will come to repay,
To avenge the blood of us all.
His wrath is descending,
We await the bowls of final wrath,
O bride, go out to meet your bridegroom! (12)

At the close of the song, the agency is God’s. The elect “rejoice,” “play,” “witness,” “await,” and “meet.” The final stanza is a call for Jerusalem to “receive your promise.”

Arise, Jerusalem, and will yourself prepare!
Receive your promise, behold your Kingdom;
Spread out wide the circle of your Tents,
Receive your children, all of them in equal measure.

Your King is coming to set you free;
His reward he brings before him, for all to see. (13)

Does Jansz specifically have in mind those who are defending Anabaptist Münster with arms? The song leaves an ambiguous impression. The injunction to "whet your scythes" is more than a little suggestive. Much about the song fits the situation of a holy city besieged. But when the battle comes at the end of the song, the Lord fights it. The Trumpet Song could, I imagine, be sung by a firmly committed pacifist eager for the Lord to wreak the vengeance she foregoes.[259] And it could be sung by a revolutionary standing on the walls of Münster, a "watcher on the gates of Zion," with halberd in hand. Like the scriptures with which it is composed, Jansz's song underdetermines action.

Whatever its implications for the violence of the elect, in this confident song, Jansz weaves together the words and images of scripture to voice the expectations and desires of thousands of Dutch Anabaptists and radicals. They hoped that God would deliver them from the persecutions and corruption of an unjust polity. These hopes, and the words of this very song, buoyed up not only those who flocked to Münster, but also Anabaptists who, like Jansz, stayed in their homes. These hopes for deliverance were crushed when Münster descended into violent chaos and the besieging army broke through its walls. The wedding feast never came.

[259] This is Timothy Nyhof's interpretation in, "The Elusive Image of the Martyr Anneke Janszdr. of Rotterdam," *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* 30/2 (Fall 2009). 30-39.

3.2.2 Letter

The second of these textual moments is a letter to the Anabaptist leader David Joris two years later. Here we see Anna Jansz as a prophet's aide, now in tune with a different, more individualized form of apocalyptic anticipation.

Sometime in the aftermath of the fall of Münster Anna Jansz began a close friendship with David Joris. Joris was a former glass blower from Delft who became the chief Anabaptist figure in the Netherlands between the fall of Münster in 1535 and the rise of Menno Simons several years later. As a charismatic and prophetic[260] but probably nonviolent figure, Joris occupied a mediating role between the revenge-oriented remnants of the Münster movement and those inclined toward pacifism.

Anna Jansz and David Joris had a formative influence on each other. They were, it seems, in love. In 1536 David Joris stayed at the home of someone who, while unnamed, was almost certainly Anna Jansz.[261] By this time, Jansz's husband Arent had probably fled to England because of persecution. This prompted a crisis in her marriage when Arent Jansz returned and accused her of infidelity, a charge strenuously denied by David Joris and Anna Jansz.[262] Whatever the circumstances, the relationship left a lasting impression on both. Historian Gary Waite suggests that Jansz, "who scholars assume to be the inspiration for [Joris'] later visions," was also initially "the catalyst for his aspirations to prophetic status."[263] David Joris' biography notes that "while in this place [Jansz's home] he received much understanding from the

---

[260] For a time, David Joris styled himself the "third David." See his 1536 tract "Hear, Hear, Hear" in *The Anabaptist Writings of David Joris: 1535-1543* edited by Gary Waite (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994), 138.
[261] "The facts of the case fit Anna Jansz." Werner Packull, "Anna Jansz of Rotterdam," in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women,* 338.
[262] "God is a witness that he had remained as pure from her, and she from him, as the smallest infant upon the earth." "The Anonymous Biography of David Joris" in *The Anabaptist Writings of David Joris*, 52.
[263] Gary Waite, *David Joris and Dutch Anabaptism,* 68.

scriptures, and divine dreams."[264] Jansz and Joris each authored apocalyptic hymns of similar style.

One of the letters of Jansz to Joris is extant, probably authored between 1536 and 1538.[265] In it Jansz affirms the coming judgment of God once again, but it is a more distant judgment, and one more focused on David Joris as the prophet bringing it about. She opens the letter with a celebration of divine sovereignty. This passage, as Willem de Bakker has observed, is a lengthy and direct quote from 2 Esdras 8:20-28—one of Ezra's prayers of praise.[266]

She next blesses Joris for his work and offers prayers for his leadership. "Be the winnow in the hand of the Lord; prepare an acceptable people" she writes, drawing once more on the images of harvest she had invoked in her Trumpet Song. Her praise and blessing draws Joris into the position that the coming divine judgment occupied in her earlier song.

> Mighty leader of Israel, beloved of the Lord, look diligently after the Lord's vineyard. Prune its saplings and do away with what hinders its growth or with what may displease the Lord…He has made you a watchman in His house, a shepherd for His flock. You are the most godly among those whose names are written….As the rain refreshes the earth and the dew the flowers of the field and makes their scent sweet to man, so do your warnings, teachings and instructions bring also refreshment and nourishment.

Before, the harvest had been the work of God, perhaps aided by the whetted scythes of the elect. Now, Jansz assigns pastoral images of harvesting, pruning, and shepherding to Joris. Jansz's invocation of Isaiah 55 via her comparison of the rain refreshing the earth sets up an implicit analogy not just with rain, but with Christ as the Word. Willem de Bakker has even argued that

---

[264] "The Anonymous Biography of David Joris" in *The Anabaptist Writings of David Joris,* 51.
[265] The letter appears in the van Bracht, the *Martyrs Mirror* (1685 edition) but is not included in English translations of the *Martyrs Mirror*. Packull translates it and includes it as an appendix at the end of "Anna Jansz of Rotterdam," in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women,* 343-4. All subsequent quotes from the letter are from these two pages.
[266] Willem de Bakker, "Lost in Translation: Re-examining the Sources of Early Dutch Anabaptism," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 92/1 (January 2018), 70.

Anna's invocation of 2 Esdras 8 puts her in the position of the prophet Ezra, in which persona "she proclaimed Joris to be 'a third David'" after Christ, the second.[267] (Here we might recall the acclamation of Luther as a "second Elijah."[268])

In the second half of the letter, Jansz longs for the day of judgment. As in her hymn, that day is imminent. "I delight that the cross is revealed and the conflict begins." But if revealed, the judgment takes time and manifests as suffering rather than vindication. "I hope that the Lord will answer my prayer and deliver me from this earthly tabernacle…. Apparently I am not yet acceptable and pure enough." It is not that she desires death in and of itself. "Life would please me well in order to teach Him to the others." But, "I dwell at all times in the midst of my enemies" who are bound to persecute her and prevent such teaching.

After Jansz's death in 1539 Joris' leadership waned and over time his teaching became even more centered on internal transformation at the expense of outward witness. He moved to Basel in 1544 and lived under an assumed name until he died in 1556, preaching internal transformation and outward conformity to the social order. Upon the publication of his identity several years later, Basel authorities exhumed and burned his corpse.[269] Presumably Jansz's letter was consonant with Joris' teachings at the time; Joris was responsible for its publication and dissemination. But in its affirmation of suffering for the sake of righteousness it stands in contrast with his later outward dissimulation.

As in her song, ambiguities abound in this letter. Is Joris a great leader, or something more, something approaching a unique prophetic status? Will the final judgment happen soon?

---

[267] De Bakker, "Lost in Translation," 70. Anna acclaims Joris "the noblest among the three." Ibid. De Bakker asserts that these three are Jan van Batenburg, Obbe Philips, and David Joris.
[268] Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell. *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,* 24.
[269] Gary Waite, "The Life and Works of David Joris," in *The Anabaptist Writings of David Joris,* 24-25.

What has changed since she wrote the hymn? In this episode with David Joris, she reveals that her apocalyptic hopes are not dead, but have been transmuted into expectation of another kind of transformation, though one much less clearly defined in terms of political and social change. The judgment is imminent, but it is by no means clear that this judgment will wreak vengeance on "the rulers" as it was in her "Trumpet Song." Her work in the meantime is to become holy, worthy of withstanding the suffering the elect are bound to receive.

3.2.3 Testament

The final episode of Jansz's life once again signals a shift in her hopes. In 1538 she returned from England to Rotterdam. This time she came with a female companion and an infant son, Isaiah. Her husband Arent was perhaps killed in the wave of persecution begun by Thomas Cromwell in early October of 1538.[270]

Historians debate the nature of her return to the Netherlands. The conventional account, as articulated most prominently by the historian Werner Packull, suggests that she was returning for ordinary reasons of family and livelihood. Perhaps the persecution in England had been too intense and in the wake of her husband's death she needed to return to family. For Willem De Bakker, however, Jansz's return was in the hope of another apocalyptic moment. De Bakker argues that David Joris sought to "gather all the remnants of the disillusioned survivors of Münster around Christmas 1538—exactly three and a half years after the collapse of the Anabaptist kingdom—in Delft" in hopes that this would mark the inbreaking of the kingdom.[271] He cites as evidence the fact that the authorities associated Joris with Meynart van Emden, in

---

[270] Packull, "Anna Jansz of Rotterdam," in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women,* 339.
[271] Willem De Bakker, "Lost in Translation," 69.

early 1539, by posting them both on the same placard and offering a reward for information about either of them.[272] Such a gathering is plausible but conjectural. In any case, if Jansz did return in expectation of an apocalypse, her letter to her son signals that such hopes had vanished by the time of her death.

A hymn betrayed her. She and her female companion were singing a song that other travelers recognized as Anabaptist—perhaps her own Trumpet Song—and turned them in.[273] The authorities in Rotterdam imprisoned her for a few months, convicted her of having been rebaptized, and drowned her outside Rotterdam on January 24, 1539. Along with Jansz, the magistrate ordered the execution of her traveling companion, Christina Michiel Barents. After they were drowned, their bodies were pulled out of the river and buried in unconsecrated ground.[274]

This final moment is stretched out and rendered legible in Anna Jansz's *Testament*, her final words to her son. In it, her hopes for imminent transformation evaporate. Instead, she articulates endurance. Her words are apocalyptic, but they have a long-term vision in mind. She sees her death as itself an apocalypse of God's way with humanity. But that apocalypse reveals a long path of suffering, not a quick triumph. To proclaim this revelation, she revisits the same scriptures woven through her Trumpet Song. However, she employs them now quite differently.

The first part of the letter to her infant son is her description and endorsement of the way of the cross to which God calls the elect. "I go today the way of the prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and drink of the cup of which they all have drank…I go, I say, the way which Christ

---

[272] Ibid.
[273] Ibid., 341.
[274] The Dutch historian Els Kloek notes this in her article on Anna Jansz, "Esaiasdr., Anneke" in the *Online Dictionary of Dutch Women* (*Digitaal Vrouwenlexicon van Nederland).*
<http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/vrouwenlexicon/lemmata/data/Esaiasdr>

Jesus….Himself went."[275] In her narration of this path of suffering, her wounds are voiced with those of martyrs past. She joins her complaint to God with the saints in Revelation 6:10 "'Lord Almighty God, when wilt Thou avenge the blood that has been shed?'" She still desires the vengeance she had sung about in her "Trumpet Song." But her *Testament* clarifies what had been ambiguous before: vengeance belongs only to God and it will not be soon in coming. True Christians, Jansz writes, are made perfect in their weakness. Only after the martyrs have completed "the number and fulfillment of Zion, the bride of the Lamb," will the New Jerusalem come "down out of heaven." In her hymn this image indicated a short period after which vengeance would come. But here in the *Testament* the way of the cross is the model of Christian life for as far ahead as can be imagined. For the imprisoned Anna, to live as a Christian is to suffer persecution, loneliness, and death while dealing out love in return. Those who suffer in this way bear the cross as Jesus did, suffering "judgment and chastisement in their flesh." She urges her son to "receive the chastisement and instruction of the Lord…for he accepts or receives no son whom he does not chasten." The unjust judges of the world, despite themselves, mete out a discipline from God intended to mark the righteous as divinely favored. The apocalypse is here already, it seems, but the judgment it reveals falls most heavily on God's beloved.

Her description of this narrow and painful path echoes the Gospels, but even more it recalls 2 Esdras. "A city is builded, and set upon a broad field, and is full of all good things: the entrance therof is narrow, and set in a dangerous place" she says, quoting 2 Esdras 7. In her hymn she had also spoken of a narrow way. There, traversing it seemed temporary. Here it is the only path to life, and an interminable one.

---

[275] Thielemann Jans van Braght, *The Martyrs Mirror*, translated by Joseph Sohm, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1949), 453. All quotations from the *Testament* will be from this and the following page.

Jansz turns her condemnation on those who would avoid the persecution that accompanies outward witness of faith. "There are some who well perceive that this is the way to life; but it is too severe for them; it pains their flesh" (454). If it is not already a condemnation of what she knows of David Joris, this is at least a condemnation of what Joris would later become after her death—outwardly dissimulating about the commitments for which Jansz would be executed.[276]

In following this path, her son Isaiah must, she writes, shy away from the majority who reject this chastisement, and cling to the "poor, simple, cast-off little flock which is despised and rejected by the world" (454). He will find Christ there by sharing with the poor. Near the close of the letter, she tells her son to

> Love your neighbor. Deal with an open warm heart your bread to the hungry, clothe the naked, and suffer not to have anything twofold; for there are always some who lack. Whatever the Lord grants you from the sweat of your face, above what you need, communicate to those of whom you know that they love the Lord; and suffering nothing to remain in your possession until the morrow, and the Lord shall bless the work of your hands (454).

If her final moment is defined textually by her *Testament,* visually it has been memorialized by a print in the 1685 second edition of the *Martyrs Mirror*. In that image Anna Jansz petitions the crowd to take and raise her infant son after her death. The crowd, the notables, and the guards all look on as Anna Jansz, perfectly upright in the middle of the frame, holds out her son and a purse to a stooped baker. Those who will kill her seem off-balance and hesitant. Her guard waits behind her, bent slightly. In light of her *Testament*'s calm embrace of the consequences of her faith, I think it is not too hagiographic to suggest that here she is most fully

---

[276] James Lowry reads this dissonance to argue for a high degree of distance between Jansz and Joris at the time of Jansz's death. "Stierf Anna van Rotterdam als volgelinge van David Joris?" *Doopsgezinde bijdragen* 18 (1992): 113-118.

in possession of herself. At her death Jansz displays a moral agency that has been born of her struggle with and through scripture since her baptism. She strove to articulate and participate in a vision of the world narrated by scripture. Time and again she rubbed up against the barbed edges of reality and her scripturally narrated vision blistered and cracked. But here among the crowd, with her final letter written to her son, she is at peace.

Figure 1: Anna Jansz gives up her son. Thieleman J. van Braght, *Het Bloedig Tooneel, Der Martelaers Spiegel Der Doops-gesinde*, (2nd ed., Amsterdam, 1685), 143.

As for Isaiah Jansz, the son she leaves behind, the *Martyr's Mirror* rather ironically describes his life as one of happiness. The *Martyrs Mirror* indicates that "when she was taken prisoner, or according to some after she learned that she was to be executed, she sought among her people someone to take care of her young son" and offered a purse with some money in it to a "baker, who had six of his own children."[277] Soon after her death the baker "started to receive God's blessings" for his act of love. He expanded his business and became wealthy. As an adult, Isaiah came to own a brewery and eventually "became burgomaster of Rotterdam." But the one who heard Jansz singing and betrayed her to the authorities faced a different fate. After witnessing the execution he had occasioned, he walked out of Rotterdam and "fell into the water and drowned when the bridge collapsed." Not only this, but "his entire household and family fell into the most extreme poverty." Anna Jansz may have described the endless suffering of the elect, but for the chroniclers of her story, blessing and judgment seem to have found the right recipients after all.

3.3 Tending Scripture's Wounds

In this section I show how Anna Jansz finds her moral agency damaged through her invocation of scriptural promises. This damage is of a piece with what I call the "wound of failure"—something present not only for readers, but in scripture itself. The wound of failure that Jansz feels is echoed in scripture: so too is the healing she finds.

---

[277] Van Braght, *Martelaers Spiegel*, (Dutch second edition, Amsterdam, 1685), 143-45. Translation by Mary Sprunger, personal correspondence.

3.3.1 Wounds of failure

We do not know how Anna Jansz viewed the revolution at Münster. She did not make the great migration to the city. Perhaps she harbored doubts about the course of events in Münster, and its leaders, as Hille Feicken expressed after her failed assassination attempt inspired by the book of Judith. But like Hille Feicken she was part of the same apocalyptic excitement. As she debated the significance of the unfolding events, the central issues would have been when and how God would decisively intervene in the early sixteenth-century, not whether God would do so.

In her final *Testament*, this hope is gone, or rather transformed into a patient endurance. Her sense of vindication remains. Jansz claims that she follows the path of suffering laid down by Christ himself, and the prophets before him. But it is a path of sorrow, not triumph. Instead, she joins her cry to the saints in Revelation 6:10, writing "Lord, Almighty God, when wilt Thou avenge the blood that has been shed?" What had before been a declaration about the imminence of judgement now becomes a plea for justice addressed to God. In the hymn, it was an imperative, a quickly approaching inevitability. There, quoting 2 Esdras 2:40 she writes

> Oh Zion, conclude the list of transfigured! 2 Es 2:40
> Your number will soon be complete

Were the promises she perceived in scripture wrong? Had she misunderstood? Had she been unfaithful? Her *Testament* suggests that if she greeted her death with resolution, it was a resolution laced with pain. "Your King is coming to set you free," she once wrote, echoing Isaiah 62:1. What did this promise mean to her several years later as the Rotterdam authorities drowned her in a distributary of the Rhine?

Jansz exemplifies what I want to call, in relation to scripture, the wound of failure. In its collective form it is a shared experience for religious groups whose messianic hopes have gone

apparently unfulfilled, from the variously construed expectations for a swift *parousia* in the earliest days of the Christianity down to modern movements like the Shakers and Seventh Day Adventists. It consists, essentially, in the dissonance that readers of scripture might feel between the promises of the Bible and the apparent lack of fulfillment in their own lives. In the presence of this dissonance, scripture's words of promise may become words of pain.

The wound of failure as I have outlined it is most visible in apocalyptic movements, but it is a much broader dynamic. Such moments of crisis and re-evaluation, full of promise and peril, happen whenever scripture seems to have promised blessings that do not come. How, as Peter Ochs has explored and my second chapter noted, did the Jewish rabbis read Isaiah 60:21 in long years of exile: "your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever?" How could these promises of living in the land from which they had been exiled not ring as painful failures?[278] Or consider the words of David Weiss Halivni, again from my second chapter. In his memoir of Holocaust survival, he includes an epigraph of his own making based on a midrash. The first part quotes the midrash, "Said the Almighty, 'If you keep what is written in this book, you will be spared this sword; if not, you will be consumed by it.'" (Midrash Rabbah Deuteronomy 4:2). Halivni continues in his own impossibly brief words, compressing the terror of the camps into a single, devastating juxtaposition: "we clung to the book, yet were consumed by the sword."[279] All the pain of this wound of failure is laid bare in that spare accusation. In the fires of the Holocaust what could be discerned of the divine faithfulness promised to Israel in its scriptures?

---

[278] See Peter Ochs, "The Bible's Wounded Authority," 117.
[279] David Weiss Halivni, *The Book and the Sword: A Life of Learning the Shadow of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux Publishers, 1996), book epigraph.

Anna Jansz does not bear the innocence we ascribe to such a victim. Her suffering is bound up with a web of moral ambiguities. But the wound of failure visible in her life extends to these diverse cases, and to the fabric of everyday tragedy, not simply collective political calamities. A child hears in Sunday School how David defeated Goliath but learns that the bullies at school will not be overcome so easily. A poor churchgoer drawn to the prosperity gospel discerns that the promise of Philippians 4:19, "my God will fully satisfy every need of yours," did not mean what she hoped. A gay teenager with internalized homophobia comes to doubt he is "fearfully and wonderfully made." Someone praying for fertility finds in the biblical Hannah a figure to emulate but discovers with sorrow that their story will have no Samuel. Scripture's patterns grate against these dissonances, large and small. These are wounds, bitter gaps forced between the Bible and those who seek to be guided by it.

3.3.2 Wounds of failure in scripture

To be sure, Anna Jansz misunderstood scripture in her Trumpet Song. If she thought 2 Esdras and Revelation foretold the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire in the sixteenth-century, she was badly mistaken. But I want to press a claim that goes a bit further than this rather pedestrian observation. Avoiding the wounds and dissonances of failure in a life with scripture is not a matter of simply adopting a better interpretive procedure. Even innocent readings yield such pain, as the writings of Ochs and Halivni illustrate. This pain is, rather, a routine part of a scripture-filled life. Overcoming it is not a matter of hermeneutical procedure so much as the slow development of practical wisdom—of knowing when and how to speak which verse about which situation. This is so not only because of human limitations, but because the pain of this wound of failure runs through scripture itself.

The wounds that Jansz bears are first borne in her scriptures. The biblical scholar David Carr has argued that much of the Bible was written in response to various historical traumas. "Suffering, and survival of it, was written into the Bible."[280] Compiled amid Babylonian exile, Genesis describes with forlorn hope a world created in love by a God who has not yet forsaken Israel. At scripture's end, the book of Revelation emerges too from the wound of failure. Written in the midst of persecution, wrestling with the absence of Christ, it provides a picture of longing for redemption and evocative imagery of the satisfaction of those desires. "'Lord Almighty God, when wilt Thou avenge the blood that has been shed?" (Revelation 6:10) The Gospels themselves record the aftermath of this wound. Christ gathered a circle of disciples who believed he was the Messiah who would sit again on the throne of David. His death shattered these hopes. Even his resurrection left them confused, as the shock of the shorter ending of the gospel of Mark attests and the beginning of the book of Acts confirms. "Lord, is *this* the time when you will restore the Kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) The church is founded on the transmutation of apparently misunderstood promises into a new kind of hope.

Anabaptist uses of 2 Esdras illustrate in more detail how this pain emerges in and from scripture. 2 Esdras was, surprisingly, an important book for sixteenth-century Anabaptists.[281] In his main work, the *Twonderboeck*, David Joris cited it more than any other apocryphal book.[282] Even the anti-apocalyptic Menno Simons made frequent use of 2 Esdras.[283] Anna Jansz turned to it often as well.

---

[280] David Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 5.
[281] For more on this, see Jonathan Seiling, "Solae (quae?) Scripturae: Anabaptists and the Apocrypha," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 80/1 (2006): 5-34.
[282] Alastair Hamilton, *The Apocryphal Apocalypse: The Reception of the Second Book of Esdras (4 Ezra) From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 135.
[283] Hamilton, *The Apocryphal Apocalypse*, 128.

2 Esdras was composed amid trauma. Traditionally held to be written by Ezra himself after the return from exile, modern scholarship suggests an origin after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. The book thus emerges from a later exile and takes place, rhetorically, during the first exile from Jerusalem. The pain of exile pervades the book. Summarizing his complaint to the angel Uriel, Ezra demands to know "why Israel has been given over to the Gentiles in disgrace; why the people whom you loved has been given over to godless tribes" (4:23). Uriel reveals to Ezra a series of stories and metaphors about the purpose of suffering and the significance of exile and the coming judgment which will set all to right. Ezra remains skeptical, remarking later that "it would have been better if the earth had not produced Adam" (7:116). Ezra's own transformation happens in the tenth chapter of the book, when he comes across a woman grieving the loss of her son and both consoles her and encourages her to grieve for all her people. In that moment the woman is transformed into a radiant city and Ezra perceives that Zion's glory, though nearly extinguished at present, will yet come. His vocation, in the aftermath of these visions, is to shepherd the faithfulness of his people. This is a model of how the wound of failure is expressed and tended in scripture: humans question divine faithfulness amid suffering, recalling promises that now seem out of reach. God then renews them for continued faithfulness until the day when all harms will be redressed.

Two themes of 2 Esdras and other apocalyptic writings show up in Anna's hymn and *Testament.* First, the book represents the forces of evil as an eagle or dragon who will be overcome. In chapter 11, Ezra receives a vision of an eagle who holds all the world in its grip and hears a voice saying "You, eagle, will surely disappear….so that the whole earth, freed from your violence, may be refreshed" (11:45-46). In her trumpet song, Anna enjoins her listeners "Do not

fear…the eagle with its mighty wings" and calls to mind as well the dragon of Revelation 12, affirming that both will soon be vanquished.

Jansz does not make the comparison explicit, but many of her contemporaries identified this eagle with the Holy Roman Empire. The Münsterite theologian Bernhard Rothmann argued that the visions in the book of Daniel described a series of historical dispensations of earthly power "into four principal leading realms, one after the other of which ever worse and more unfit should follow."[284] These realms were commonly understood to be the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks, and finally the Romans. Rothmann, with many of his contemporaries, viewed the Holy Roman Empire as the legitimate continuation of the Roman Empire itself, albeit one that stood a little shakily ("let men indeed hearken at the cracking!").[285] The eagle of 2 Esdras was easily imagined as the double headed eagle of imperial heraldry.

For Rothmann, the imminent fall of this last kingdom heralded the inauguration of a new form of politics. "All earthly power shall with these chief empires tumble down and perish."[286] Instead of these violent regimes, "a holy realm will arise and rule the entire earth," starting at Münster.[287] For Jansz too, the depictions of oppressive beasts vanquished in apocalyptic biblical literature applied to the governmental structures of her own day.

Additionally, Jansz drew on the notion that the suffering of the elect must be completed before the end comes. In 2 Esdras Ezra proclaims "Take again your full number, O Zion, and close the list of your people who are clothed in white, who have fulfilled the law of the Lord. The number of your children, whom you desired, is now complete." (2 Esdras 1:40-41) In 2 Esdras

---

[284] Bernhard Rothmann, *On Earthly and Temporal Power*, translated by George Albert Moore (Moore Series, 1950), 45.
[285] Rothmann, *On Earthly and Temporal Power*, 45.
[286] Ibid.
[287] Ibid., 49.

this moment is simultaneously present and future. Its completion is announced, and the angel Uriel underlines its imminence, but it is not quite realized. In her hymn, Jansz turns this notion into a present imperative. She enjoins Zion to "conclude the list of transfigured! Your number will soon be complete." Precisely here, in Jansz's invocation of 2 Esdras 1:40-1, a trope meant to provide comfort during suffering became a seed that would grow into painful thorns.

To understand the nature of those thorns we have to understand the force of apocalyptic literature. Part of the power of an apocalypse like 2 Esdras—or Daniel, Ezekiel, or Revelation—is that it allows sufferers to live already in anticipation of future justice. Suffering the trials of persecution may therefore become a way of participating however distantly in the triumph of God over the forces of evil. Howard Thurman describes this reclamation of moral agency more generally as Christianity's "answer to the threat of violence." He argues that, "to the degree to which a [person] knows *this"*—that is, knows that the moral intelligibility of the universe flows not from their oppressors, but from their participation in the story God has already written—they "are unconquerable from within and without."[288] This aspect of apocalyptic language is what James Cone calls "the transcendent present."[289] For enslaved Africans singing spirituals that anticipated redemption such language was not escapism, it was a sign that "God's future had broken into the slave's historical present."[290] Apparent impotence against enduring injustice was remade into a powerful persistence. That is the power of the promises of apocalyptic literature.

2 Esdras emerges from wounds of failure—two exiles—and provides a model of response. When readers come to discern scripture wisely in the face of suffering, they participate

---

[288] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 46.
[289] James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1972), 92.
[290] Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 92.

in that scriptural pattern. As the reader encounters scripture, the events of scripture happen "again" for the reader—not as the communication of an abstract allegorical concept, but as an encounter with the same Word who was present at the events of scripture, superintended its writing, and now renews them for the reader.[291]

Following the pattern initiated by the figure of Ezra in these texts, such readers who are faced with the gap between scriptural promises of blessing and the reality of ongoing suffering may emerge with a stronger sense of participation in God's faithfulness. That gap between promised blessing and lived suffering is a "stumbling block"—in Origen's sense—which trips up the reader and causes them to inquire more deeply into the sense in which the promises of scripture might be spoken again wisely. If like Ezra or the enslaved Africans written about by Thurman and Cone, they are able to glimpse God's faithfulness amid suffering, readers may see how such promises can be claimed truthfully after all.

The risk, though, is that this "happening again" becomes ossified. One of the paradigmatic scriptural moments revealing the significance of apocalyptic language comes in the Gospels' accounts of the transfiguration. Peter, John, and James go with Jesus up the mountain and behold the vision of Moses and Elijah flanking Jesus. Peter reveals the temptation most characteristic of human responses to such glimpses of glory. "'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said.'" (Luke 9:33). Peter grasps the moment and wants to hold on to it and remain on the

---

[291] As Origen writes, the gospels "present the sojourn of Christ and prepare for his coming *and produce it in the souls* of those who are willing to receive the Word of God who stands at the door and knocks and wishes to enter their souls." Origen, *Commentary on John 1.26.* Emphasis added. Quoted in John David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 137. John David Dawson summarizes this dynamic effectively. "The ethical task is to read in a way that allows or enables that occurrence to happen 'again' for the present-day reader." Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity,* 137.

mountain, to make a permanent home there. But Christians cannot do so, yet. Apocalyptic glimpses of the Lord's triumph are, for now, a temporary glory. To make permanent dwellings out of these words of scripture is to misuse them.

If the disappointment of scriptural promises is like a seed that grows and may produce the fruit of wisdom, that same seed may also produce thorns causing further pain. Consider how Paul's words to the marginal Christian community in Rome—not apocalypse, merely counsel—became a spur to violence in the twelfth-century abbot Bernard of Clairvaux's preaching as he urged the Christians of the Holy Roman Empire to join the Second Crusade. He quoted Romans 13:4, assuring them that theirs was not an errand of sinful murder: "[I]f he kills, he is serving Christ, for as a minster of God 'he does not carry the sword in vain.'"[292] But the soldiers of the Second Crusade did carry their swords in vain. Thirst, disease and Seljuk ambush killed them on the Anatolian plateau; their errand of death consumed them. Bernard would subtly shift his eschatology in the wake of his exhortations to disaster.[293]

Similarly, the life of Anna Jansz and the broader Münster movement demonstrates the characteristic danger of scripture's apocalyptic affirmation of the vindication of the suffering elect. Promises that generate moral agency can be turned to orders underwriting human actions that go astray. This is especially true when the word of comfort comes to those who have come into possession of power. Then the comforting word to an oppressed remnant may become the permission slip to cleanse Münster of those who refuse baptism or marriage. In such cases, scripture's powerful promises help to generate the same pain they initially redressed. What

---

[292] Quoted in Ephraim Radner, *Time and the Word,* 283.
[293] Mary Wagner, "The Impact of the Second Crusade on the Angelology and Eschatology of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux," *Journal of Religious History,* 37/3 (September 2013): 322-40.

comforted Ezra's sense of failure also stimulated Jansz's hopes—hopes that would fail and disappoint her in turn.

The postliberal theologian George Lindbeck wrote of what he called the "intrasystemic" truth quality of Christian proclamation, calling both Anna Jansz and Bernard of Clairvaux to mind. "The crusader's battle cry "*Christus est Dominus,"…*is false when used to authorize cleaving the skull of the infidel."[294] For Lindbeck this example demonstrated that the truthfulness of a statement consists not simply in its reference to some deeper reality but in its coherence with a other practices and beliefs. Lest we slip into mere coherentism, with George Hunsinger we might add that for the crusader, "the deed is falsified by the word."[295] The crusader is false *because* Christ truly is Lord, a different kind of Lord entirely.

This Lord faced the same temptation to grasp scripture's promises too tightly. On the pinnacle of the temple, the devil tempted Jesus with the words of scripture. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" (Matthew 4:6) These temptations occurred just after Jesus' baptism and the Father's declaration that he was "my Son, the Beloved" (Matthew 3:17). What kind of Sonship would this be? Jesus' response to the devil's temptations—"Do not put the Lord your God to the test"—points to the difficulty I have been tracing in this chapter.

But his words here are not only a scriptural maxim that rebuts and qualifies the devil's quotation of Psalm 91. Christ's proverb has a history. After their deliverance from slavery, the

---

[294] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 64.
[295] George Hunsinger, "Truth as Self-Involving: Barth and Lindbeck on the Cognitive and Performative Aspects of Truth in Theological Discourse," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61/1 (Spring 1993), 47.

people of Israel were tempted as well. In the wilderness at Massah, they doubted the faithfulness of the God who had brought them out of Egypt and promised them a new land, but who seemed unable to provide water in their moment of need. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? To kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (Exodus 17:3).[296] At Massah, the people of Israel were confronted by the wound of failure. The promise seemed to have gone terribly wrong. In anger, Moses provided them with water by striking a rock (which later patristic exegetes read Christologically as the crucified Christ). Later, in Deuteronomy 6:16, as Moses instructs the people on how they shall live in the land, he commands, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah."

When Jesus responds to the devil's prompt to throw himself from the temple by quoting Moses, he calls forward this whole saga of faithfulness, wounded hope, and reproof. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" is a saying, a caution against speaking a scriptural promise too boldly; it is also a story, a recollection of comfort and warning. In this way, it says: do not give up hope. You do not yet see how scripture will be fulfilled; you must not press it too hard. The God who brought you thus far will carry you through, but you must not assume you know how. Jesus' deployment of Deuteronomy 6:16 sounds like a rejection of martyrdom for martyrdom's sake.

Jesus does not throw himself from the temple. He does not claim a scriptural promise and force its fulfillment; instead, others lift him up onto the cross. There, the wisdom of God is put to the test by sinful humanity and, in the resurrection, not found wanting. If the negative command is "Do not put the Lord your God to the test"—as at Massah, as at Golgotha—then its positive corollary might be something from the same scriptural moment, in Exodus 14:14: "The Lord will

---

[296] Numbers 20 contains a different but parallel account, where the failure of Moses is intertwined with that of the people.

fight for you and you have only to keep still." Christ the wisdom of God has already passed the test. What remains is participation in that wisdom: "keeping still" as patience abiding and endurance.

3.3.3 Anna Jansz's wisdom

At her death, Anna Jansz does not possess the fullness of Christ's wisdom. Still, she gained much, and it is worth lingering over her wisdom's character. To see it more clearly I want to stipulate a definition of wisdom, for present purposes, as the skill of knowing how to speak which scriptural locutions, and when, and of what. I owe this notion of scriptural wisdom to Mark James. In a recent book, James argues that Origen's exegesis is not a matter of applying an allegorical procedure to scripture, but learning from scripture how to speak scripturally. James suggests that "Origen tends to approach scriptural texts with an interest in *pragmatic* questions about the possible contexts in which they may be used. Who may say these words? On what occasion? With respect to what?"[297] The answers to such questions take the form not of universal principles, but innumerable maxims that require practical wisdom to apply to specific situations. My own examples of guiding maxims might include: "If there are children in your house, bless them with the priestly benediction at bedtime" or "Do not read Romans 13 without remembering that Roman authorities beheaded Paul."[298] James contrasts this limited and pragmatic approach

---

[297] Mark Randall James, *Learning the Language of Scripture: Origen, Wisdom, and the Logic of Interpretation* (Boston: Brill, 2021), 24. As Origen puts it, "Consider the scriptures as analogous to all herbs, or as one perfect body of reason. But if you are not a botanist of the scriptures or an anatomist of the prophetic words, do not suppose something to have been written in vain, but blame yourself rather than the holy letters, when you cannot discover the rational order of what is written." *Philocalia* 10.2, quoted by James on 154.

[298] At least according to Christian tradition, via the later testimony of Dionysius of Corinth, Tertullian, Jerome, and others.

against the universal context that modern readers tend to bring —whether canonical, ecclesial, or historical-critical.

In light of this framing, one of the questions of this chapter might be reformulated as: who may speak which sentences from 2 Esdras, and how and when and of what? Framing it this way allows us to see how Jansz changes her relation to these scriptures while maintaining trust in their promises. In her *Testament,* Anna does not repudiate the faith that brought her death. Nor does she turn away in anger from the scriptures that she had read as promising immediate vindication. Instead, she revisits them. What emerges is a different sense of how to speak the apocalyptic words of scripture. Jansz is still quoting the same apocalyptic texts at her death, but she speaks them differently.

I summarize this difference—the product of her wisdom—in two maxims. The first is a pair of two:

> Speak 2 Esdras 2:40 as a future hope
> Pray Revelation 6:10 as a present plea

2 Esdras 2:40 reads: "Take again your full number, O Zion, and close the list of your people who are clothed in white, who have fulfilled the law of the Lord." In her song, Jansz speaks the promise of the completion of the number as a present, or near-present, reality. Indeed, she issues it as a command! However, in her *Testament,* 2 Esdras 2:40 refers to a distant reality. Instead, Revelation 6:10 assumes more prominence as a plea for deliverance (and an implicit answer).

> This way was trodden by the dead under the altar, who cry, saying: 'Lord, Almighty God, when wilt Thou avenge the blood that has been shed? White robes were given unto them, and it was said to them; Wait yet for a little season, until the number of your brethren that are yet to be killed for the testimony of Jesus, be fulfilled.

The promise of 2 Esdras 2:40 ought to be spoken as a future hope, and not a present command, Jansz's final *Testimony* suggests, while the plea for vengeance in Revelation 6:10 spoken by the saints may also be spoken by ordinary Christians as an expression of their present reality and a mode of participation in the final victory. In essence, Jansz's temporal horizon has expanded. Judgment will come later, not now. It is a simple observation, but one that is most clearly visible as a distinction between the temporal reference of specific passages. It is a hard-won, practical wisdom.

Here is a second maxim, this time concerning not the timing of the judgment, but its object:

> When you pray for judgment on enemies, remember that 'the Lord chastens those whom he loves' (Hebrews 12:6).

On my reading (which as I will show is contested), in her *Testament,* Jansz takes pains to elaborate that suffering is intrinsic to the path of righteousness. In her hymn, suffering had featured as a temporary trial before the justice of God arrived. In her *Testament,* not only has the final judgment been delayed, as it were, but immediate reckoning has fallen most heavily on the elect. She encourages her son to "enter in through the strait gate, receive the chastisement and instruction of the Lord, bow your shoulders under His yoke, and cheerfully bear it from your youth, with thanksgiving, rejoicing and honor; for 'He accepts or receives no son, whom He does not chasten'" (Hebrews 12:6).[299] Jansz draws on a variety of scriptural texts to make this point again and again: the way of faithfulness requires suffering. "Judgment must begin at the house of God," she writes, echoing 1

[299] Jansz, *Testament.*

Peter 4:17. Jansz's sense of judgment on enemies is as strong as ever, but it is now amended by an embrace of suffering, in the meantime. Such suffering will be understood as a mark of favor. The dictum of Hebrews 12:6—"The Lord disciplines those whom he loves"—ought, for Jansz, to amend any prayer for immediate vindication against enemies. There will be a final reckoning, but the long path toward it requires painful purification.

There are other ways to construe these changes, and other, smaller differences in her use of scripture across these three texts. However, I believe it is most helpful to narrate Jansz's development here as growth in practical wisdom understand as amended maxims of usage that govern how she gives voice to the apocalyptic promises of scripture. It is not the achievement of perfect wisdom, as I will argue in the next section, but its failings make it all the more realistic as a picture of ordinary wisdom. In any case, this growth renegotiates Anna Jansz's life in relation to scripture. The wounds of failure remain, but now they are cries voiced by scripture itself. She laments *with* Revelation 6:10. In doing so, her own suffering and death, rather than a mark of failure, becomes a mode of participation in the eschatological victory of Christ despite her own death. The rough dissonance between the events of her time and the promises of scripture has chafed her terribly, but her final words and action reveal a life sanded smooth.

Her tending of scripture's wounds, and her own, is not unusual. Those whose hopes are dashed often take resigned comfort in the final, far-off victory. But other paths are commonly taken. She might, like the militant remnants of the Münster movement, have agitated for continued armed resistance, out of the conviction that the apocalypse was indeed just around the corner. She might, like David Joris, have lived a longer life of "inward" spiritual transformation,

by recanting at her trial and dissimulating her true beliefs. Her path, instead, took her through the pain voiced by scripture itself. “Lord, Almighty God, when wilt Thou avenge the blood that has been shed?”

When readers come up against these wounds and when the patterns of pain in their own mortal lives match the painful promises and questions of the text, healing may come. In her *Testament* and in the closing moments of her life, Jansz finds that by revisiting those portions of scripture which had seemed most promising, and which therefore now contrasted most sharply with the failures around her, she could voice her pain most clearly. By joining her voice to scripture’s laments she comes to reaffirm her own agency and her own participation in the world to come.

I have not articulated these developments as a hermeneutical procedure, nor have I suggested that tradition or virtuous exemplars played a role in Jansz’s acquisition of wiser patterns of speech. Because of the paucity of historical detail, no such exemplars—aside from the dubious model of David Joris—are obvious. I do not mean, therefore, to suggest that Jansz is a heroic model of individualized exegesis, performing the experiments that lead to new discoveries. In any given art, wisdom generally develops through the interplay between imitating exemplars and individual innovation. The painter learns from her teachers while developing her own style. The scientist follows standard lab procedures while venturing into new territory. In each of these cases, participation in traditions of belief and practice make new work possible. Wisdom, as well as its malformations, resides in community.

But little of such accumulated tradition is documented in Jansz’s case. In turn, she would pass nothing on to her son except a bag of coins and her *Testament.* What Jansz achieved, then, is neither some replicable procedure, nor a demonstration of ideal transmission of interpretive

wisdom in a tradition. It is, rather, a picture of what interpretation looks like when traditions have broken down. At such times, the gap between what God speaks in scripture and what humans speak and mean when they give voice to the same text looms large. It is, as Karl Barth says of even ordinary preaching, "a stark impossibility which here stares us in the face—that men should speak what God speaks; but it is one which in Jesus Christ is already overcome."[300] Jansz show how the Spirit may empower ordinary readers to grow in wisdom and voice scripture more truthfully. Following distantly in the footsteps of the wisdom of God, in her *Testament*, Jansz speaks the word of God by grace.

This wisdom that comes by grace may deliver with it risk and burden. Jansz's wounds are bound up with wounds within scripture, wounds that are part of scripture's very composition. The reading of these scriptures wounds—the reading of the apocalyptic cries for justice—have themselves occasioned further suffering. With Revelation 6:10 Jansz can justly raise a complaint to God and the Rotterdam mayor about her imprisonment and death. But the Catholic and Lutheran residents of Münster can raise that same cry in response to their expulsion by Anabaptists who read Esdras 2, Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation to authorize their rule. These scriptures were born in pain, testify to endurance of those sufferings, and yet have occasioned further suffering.

Anna Jansz's life reveals a broader dynamic: how people who have suffered from the wound of failure in their lives continue to bear and negotiate sacred texts. Her life is a picture of the limits and possibilities of that burdened negotiation. New forms of moral agency are possible, but, in her case at least, they do not entirely escape the pitfalls of the old, as the next section will

---

[300] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 749.

illustrate. By grace Jansz finds in scripture a renewal and transformation of her hopes for vindication and vengeance. But Jansz is still wounded by the struggle, still dies as a result, and still leaves behind a legacy that will both inspire and burden her descendants. By touching scripture's wounds, human readers may be healed of their own injuries, but their scars will remain. To those we now turn.

3.4 Memory, Failure, and Hope

Voicing scripture well is a challenge that shares certain difficulties in common with remembering the martyrs. In this final section I first summarize how Anna Jansz has been memorialized. Then I articulate the burdens of that legacy. Finally, I provide an account of eschatological hope as a virtue of reading and memory.

3.4.1 Contested memory

David Joris was the first to memorialize Anna Jansz's life and death. In 1539 he published her *Testament* along with her Trumpet Song and his own remarks on martyrdom. Her *Testament* began to circulate as a song as well. Apparently within weeks of her death, Anabaptists in Hamburg began singing a song about her drowning and final words to her son.[301] This song made it into the early editions of the *Ausbund,* an Anabaptist hymnal. The Amish still use the *Ausbund,* and this song commemorating Anna Jansz is the eighteenth entry in it to this day. It is framed around the moment Jansz lets go of Isaiah and passes him into the hands of the baker. Most of the verses are summaries of her advice in the *Testament.* Jansz's own words came to be a

[301] Nanne van der Zijpp, "Hymnology of the Mennonites in the Netherlands," *Mennonite Quarterly Review,* 31/1 (January 1957), 11.

model for other martyrs as well. Thirty-four years later in 1573, Maeyken van Deventer wrote a testament to her children before her execution in Rotterdam for being an Anabaptist. Van Deventer copied several sections of her letter directly from Anna Jansz's *Testament*, especially her description of suffering as a necessary path for the elect.[302]

In 1562, the first Anabaptist martyrology, *Het Offer des Heeren* ("The Sacrifice of the Lord") included Jansz within it. This Mennonite collection did not include other martyrs affiliated with Joris, and certainly not any figures affiliated with Münster. This material eventually made it into the *Martyrs Mirror* when Thielemann Jans van Braght compiled it in 1660. In the 1560s, contending Dutch Anabaptist groups already used martyrologies to justify their specific micro-confessional commitments and erase rival claimants to Anabaptist orthodoxy. Noting how later versions of the *Sacrifice of the Lord* left out martyrs associated with rival Anabaptist groups, Bradley Gregory suggests that "the larger structure of martyrdom in early modern Christianity—the link between confessional affiliation and martyr recognition—was replicated on a smaller scale within one branch of Anabaptism."[303] Somehow, Jansz's tangled story made it through this gauntlet of dueling martyr collections to be included in the *Martyrs Mirror*.

The abiding presence of Jansz' story in Mennonite martyr collections has puzzled contemporary historians. For some historians of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, she is one of a "number of 'misplaced' martyrs in the *Mirror*."[304] In a book of pure victims, Anna Jansz seems out of place. According to the Dutch Mennonite historian Karl Vos, Anna Jansz was "unbalanced,

---

[302] "A Testament Made By Maeyken van Deventer For Her Children," *Martyrs Mirror*, 977. I owe this observation to David Weaver-Zercher, who himself gets it from James Lowry. *Martyrs Mirror: A Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 348.
[303] Bradley Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 235.
[304] Werner Packull, "Anna Jansz of Rotterdam: A Historical Investigation of an Early Anabaptist Heroine," in *Archive for Reformation History*, 78 (1987): 170. Packull, however, revises his judgment somewhat in later work.

nervous, over-strung" with "fantastic expectations of the coming kingdom."[305] A.F. Mellink thought that her inclusion in the *Martyrs Mirror* was a mistake.[306] Anna Jansz's life before her death certainly raises questions about why she was included. David Joris and his followers—other than Jansz—are not mentioned. Joris was ultimately deemed unfit to be included with the true stream of Anabaptism represented in the text, given his eventual turn toward outward dissimulation. It is odd, then, that someone with known connections to Joris found a prominent place in the text. In addition, her "Trumpet Song" and association with Meynaart van Emden place her close to the Münsterites, likewise considered deviations from true Anabaptism.

The conflicted state of contemporary historical scholarship does not clarify the picture. For Timothy Nyhof, for example, Anna Jansz was no anomaly, but a "model martyr within the Anabaptist tradition."[307] Nyhof contends that Anna Jansz demonstrates perfect consistency between her Trumpet Song and her *Testament.* In both, she calls for divine vengeance rather than assuming she will mete it out herself. Nyhof identifies this with the apocalyptic spirituality of Melchior Hoffmann, in contrast with Münster. "The difficulty, it seems, may not be with her image as a martyr but rather an inability by modern evangelical Anabaptism to deal with historical events like Münster and the Melchiorite Anabaptist streams of thought."[308] Werner Packull, who wrote the definitive contemporary account of Jansz's life, sees more nuanced development in Jansz's writings—and I have followed his narration. However, he too came to see

---

[305] Packull, "Anna Jansz of Rotterdam," in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women,* 356.
[306] Ibid.
[307] Timothy Nyhof, "The Elusive Image of the Martyr Anneke Janszdr. of Rotterdam," 37. "Her writings exhibit a consistent Melchiorite stream of Dutch Anabaptism" in which, unlike the Münsterites, the coming judgment "was not to be performed by those who had been marked with the sign of Thau. The wrath of God was to be His alone." 37.
[308] Ibid., 37.

Jansz as a "model martyr" whose inclusion in the *Martyrs Mirror* was "entirely justified."[309] The *Mennonite Encyclopedia* described her final words to her son as "a glorious confession of faith and evidence of a faithful mother's love which deserves to be better known."[310] By contrast, Willem de Bakker has argued for a much messier picture of Jansz's life, and by extension, the origins of Dutch Anabaptism. For de Bakker, the violent apocalypticism of the Münster movement did not end with the city's collapse in 1535 but continued until 1540 in various uprisings and expectations of impending judgement. More dramatically, he implicates Menno Simons and the whole succeeding generation of Dutch Anabaptist leaders in this ferment, and argues that they consciously covered up their involvement in the chiliastic movements of the decade as they built up a quietist Anabaptist movement in the succeeding years.[311] As I have already noted, de Bakker suggests that Anna Jansz returned to the Netherlands at the end of 1538 because David Joris was attempting to gather "all the remnants of the disillusioned survivors of Münster around Christmas 1538—exactly three and a half years after the collapse of the Anabaptist kingdom" at the home of his mother.[312] Quite what they expected is unclear, according to de Bakker. But he argues that David Joris anticipated an apocalyptic transformation to begin there at Christmas 1538 and Anna Jansz was joining him for the purpose of participating in it. The Anna Jansz in this chronology is an unrepentant apocalyptic, convinced even at her death that the small band of the elect would see the end in a few months.

Which is it then? Anna the prophet of violent judgement? Anna the resolute pacifist martyr? Anna the chastened militant? These are questions of fact, and my own narration has

---

[309] Packull, "Anna Jansz of Rotterdam," in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women,* 342.
[310] Ibid, 336.
[311] Willem De Bakker, "Lost in Translation: Re-Examining the Sources of Early Dutch Anabaptism," 54-84.
[312] Ibid., 69.

revealed my judgment that Jansz did experience a significant transformation between her hymn and her *Testament.* However, in telling a story like Jansz's we are faced not only with the difficulty of arranging the facts correctly. We are faced also with the ethical challenge of telling a complex story well. We must tell it, at minimum, in such a way as to avoid using the story as an occasion for self-congratulation. The life of Jansz ought to inspire reflection not only on how Christians may grow in scriptural wisdom, but how remembering the martyrs is an analogous struggle that requires a parallel kind of wisdom.

3.4.2 Burdened memory

One problem with martyrs is that they may come to signify only the rightness of those who remember them. If it is easy to spot this danger, it is difficult to avoid. The Mennonite theologian Christopher Huebner has articulated one strategy for doing so. In an essay on martyrdom, Huebner argues that Christian martyrdom should not be understood instrumentally, as a validation of something else. Rather, since the martyr relinquishes control of her life, martyrdom is itself an intrinsically Christian act, an expression of the core of Christian life.[313] Anna Jansz is not a witness to perfect adherence to some set standard; Anna Jansz gains her life by losing it, as may we. As Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it in a similar vein, "death is what gives life its form and shape."[314] However, if this emphasis on death helps read martyrdom Christologically and perhaps makes it more difficult to turn martyrs into legitimizing tokens, it also risks overwhelming the texture of a martyr's life. Once the primary defining feature of a

---

[313]"The martyr is not one who dies *for* or *because of* her beliefs. Rather, the death of the martyr is in some meaningful way the very expression of belief itself…an expression of a way of life that gives up the assumption of being in control." Christopher Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2006), 137.

[314] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness,* trans. Richard Beckley (San Francisco, Ignatius Press: 1994), 136.

martyr is their mode of death, they can once more be turned into symbols guaranteeing the rightness of their contemporary partisans.

Despite its complications, Jansz's story has been well suited to this function. Stripped of context in the political and religious struggles of early sixteenth-century Northern Europe, she can stand as the ideal feminine martyr who simultaneously fulfills her role as a tender mother and a heroic Christian. Somehow, she did just that in the 1874 edition of *Sunshine,* a collection of inspirational stories collected by the Anglican minister W. Meynell Whittemore. There even Jansz's Anabaptism—of any variety—is stripped away and she becomes a generically Protestant martyr whose only texture is her love for her son and her opposition to Roman Catholicism. In this rendition she is betrayed by a song once again, but it becomes "a German hymn of the Reformed Church!"[315]

While not prominent, Jansz's martyrdom has gained some minor traction among contemporary Mennonites. Unlike the quietist Swiss Brethren or the apocalyptic Münsterites, Anna Jansz can be made to represent an Anabaptism oriented toward nonviolent pursuit of justice in the here and now. On this telling, she was killed not merely for her peculiar beliefs about baptism, but for a substantive vision of just social relations—yet apparently without the coercion of Münster. In a recent essay, for example, Gerald Mast presents Jansz as undergoing a conversion away from violence in her relationship with Joris. Through her attachment to Joris she "rejected the violence of Münster" and joined the "renewal movement of David Joris" who advocated "for an inward, peace, and spiritual restoration of the way of Christ."[316] Mast goes on

---

[315] W. Meynell Whittemore, *Sunshine for 1874* (London, 1874), 87.
[316] Gerald Mast, "Anna Jansz," *Bearing Witness Stories Project* (Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism), accessed at <https://martyrstories.org/anna-jansz/>

to compare Jansz's *Testament,* written from jail, with Bonhoeffer's prison writings and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." There is little harm in such accounts and perhaps much good, but they risk turning Jansz into nothing more than a symbol guaranteeing the authenticity of Anabaptist participation in contemporary struggles for justice. Such forms of memory fail to do justice to Jansz's complex life.

If one problem with martyrs is their endless capacity to justify their memorialists, another might concern the content they reify by their death. In Jansz's case, parts of her hard-won wisdom have proven detrimental to her spiritual descendants. Jansz's clear delimitation of the righteous, suffering remnant, combined with the pathos of her final moment and its conformity to a gendered ideal made her extremely attractive to later martyrologists. This fierce commitment to purity would not only aid the patient endurance of Anabaptists facing persecution, but also fuel countless schisms and abusive forms of leadership. There are perhaps three million Anabaptists in the world today, but they are divided into dozens of different confessions and denominational bodies that have splintered off from each other over the past five hundred years. Jansz certainly did not cause this, and it is not unique to Anabaptism, but her acquired wisdom participates in its pitfalls.

Consider the second interpretive maxim I drew out of Jansz's *Testament:* "When you pray for judgment on enemies, remember that 'the Lord chastens those whom he loves.'" This is my formulation, not Jansz's, but it states an assumption clearly visible in her text: the righteous will always suffer and should embrace that suffering as proof of election. Here, surely, is a bit of hard-won wisdom that requires further refinement.

As I recalled above, when the devil prompts Christ to throw himself from the temple, he does not acquiesce. He does not invite such chastening. Jansz responded to her misperception of

scriptural promises by associating election with suffering. Contemporary Mennonite reception of the *Martyrs Mirror* has tended quite rightly to dissent from this strong association, pointing to its disturbing results. One line from a recent volume captures the way this focus on suffering can be turned destructively inward: "how much flesh must we flay from our bones before we feel we've expiated the ease of our lives?"[317]

Jansz's account of suffering should be amended with Christ's dictum "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." After all, the Lord may indeed chasten the elect, as Hebrews threatens, but this is no recommendation of chastening itself. When all we recall of the martyr is their grisly determination to death, the texture of their love smooths away. This is a loss. In the previous chapter's exploration of the wounds of Christ I noted that the wounds have power not because of an intrinsic value of suffering, but because of the solidarity and participation Christ's wounds bring about. So too, martyrdom names what happens because of the martyr's love for life, and the giver of life, not what happens because of the martyr's love for death. At least on some occasions it is better to say "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" instead of "the Lord chastens those whom he loves," as Jansz did upon her death. The trick is knowing when to say which.

We might say more about the wisdom of Anna Jansz, perhaps about the love we owe the world, or about what it means to speak the promises of Israel as a Gentile—how election is a gift contrary to Gentile nature, not a possession. But all this might be summed up with the observation that interpretive wisdom is iterative. It requires constant testing and refinement not simply within

[317] Kirsten Eve Beachy, "Me and the Martyrs," in *Tongue Screws and Testimonies* (Herald Press, 2010), 42

a life—as Jansz exemplifies—but in community and by the memory that spans generations. That is to say, the wisdom of her heirs depends in part upon right remembering.

Learning from Jansz's wisdom requires remembering her well and refusing to allow her to become a means of self-justification.[318] This requires remembering her in all her complexity, including the ways she changed over time. When the ambiguities of her story are forgotten, when the wounds she participated in—and perhaps never fully disavowed—are smoothed over, she becomes a token to certify that nothing about the listener's life needs to change. Instead, we should remember those wounds and abide with them, just as Jansz abided with the wounds she found in her reading of scripture.

3.4.3 Reading with a martyr: memory and hope

Martyrdom names, among other things, the process by which a murder can seed new life. In his reflections on the language of blood in Christianity, Eugene Rogers points out how the process of martyrdom is a way of recontextualizing the blood of the victim so that it signifies not the dangerous loss of life outside the body, but the recirculation of blood inside a larger organism. "What makes their death martyrdom and not just murder is our ability to read it as gathering a

[318] As John Roth puts it with reference to stories from the *Martyrs Mirror* more generally, "the Mennonite focus on martyr stories can blur into a naïve sentimentalism or, worse, become a commodity to be consumed. Cultivating a memory of victimhood can easily foster a sense of self-righteousness and arrogance that blinds us to the human frailties that are also deeply woven into the Mennonite tradition." "Forgiveness and the Healing of Memories," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 42/4 (2007): 581. Nancy Heisey narrates a similar dynamic historically. "Mennonite uses of the label 'martyr' have covered a spectrum of experiences, including the twentieth- century persecution of Russian Mennonites during and following the Bolshevik Revolution and the imprisonment of some U.S. conscientious objectors during World War I. The closer such events are to our own time, the more possible it is to raise questions about the complex dimensions of reasons for these deaths." Nancy Heisey, "Remembering Dirk Willems: Memory and History in the Future of Ecumenical Relationships," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47/ 3 (2012) 366.

new society around their blood."[319] But he wonders, "can martyrs also enlarge a community, rather than merely inflame it?"[320]

How might Anabaptists remember Anna Jansz well? Jansz witnesses not only to aspirations of purity, but much more to the imperfections that accompany wisdom's growth. Given the complexity of her story, her inclusion in the *Martyrs Mirror* is itself, I think, a sign of eschatological hope. Some awareness of Jansz's complicated connections must have coexisted with her commemoration by a tradition that has been suspicious of those connections. As Werner Packull notes of the ferment of the time "revolutionary and peace Anabaptists, Jorists, and *Doopgezinde,* initially co-existed in the same movement and…for a time at least, in one and the same person."[321] As an Anabaptist, for me to remember Anna Jansz well is to allow that complexity to call my present life into question. How do my failings participate in hers? How do the little redemptions of her life make possible my own?

Jansz's presence in the pages of the *Martyrs Mirror* is a foretaste of the age when all martyrs, particularly all Christians martyred by Christians, will be joined together into one body. Remembering rightly, in Anna Jansz's case, requires holding her whole life out as a sign of hope and confession of sin. As Rowan Williams has written, "the memory of the martyrs (*all* the martyrs) can and should be for the church a part of its eucharistic life, where it identifies itself as oppressor and traitor, yet also the penitent and restored kin of Christ."[322] To remember a martyr

---

[319] Eugene Rogers, *Blood Theology: Seeing Red in Body- and God-Talk* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 76.
[320] Ibid.
[321] Packull, "Anna Jansz of Rotterdam," in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women,* 342. Packull is speaking of David Joris, but it is even more true of Anna Jansz.
[322] Rowan Williams, *Resurrection,* 51.

well is to hold up the conflicting fragments of their life in the hope that wisdom will teach their application.

So too with scripture. Jansz is not a model of perfection in the art of exegesis. Rather, she exemplifies perseverance under the discipline of hope. To read scripture wisely is to be disciplined by the hope that each of its words may be spoken well by one God. It is to believe that the torn pieces of scripture that seem to contradict one another or rub up against the hard-won lessons of one's experience are knit together in the mind of God. Learning to voice scripture well takes place under the difficult pressure of this hope. Without such hope the Word cannot become flesh in the mouths of scripture's speakers.

Conclusion

As one example of scripture's wounds, in this chapter I have wrestled with the gap between divine and human speech that confronts Christians when they read the Bible. Apocalyptic movements are only the most obvious of these occasions. Such movements may indeed be dangerous and aberrant, but they nonetheless express this painful truth at the heart of Christian life with the scriptures: Christians cannot speak these words as God speaks them, except by the Spirit's grace and wisdom.

Jansz comes away from her immersion in scripture wounded by failed promises she took from her reading. By continuing to engage the source of her wounds, she transforms them into signs of hope. Jansz is herself transformed and demonstrates a new sensibility about how to narrate her world scripturally so that the apocalyptic hope of the Bible illuminated a way of living in the world rather than a vision of death. This model of reparative reading builds practical wisdom, but it is a burdened transformation. Her wisdom, while perhaps enough for her time,

bequeathed to later generations living in different contexts a lack of sophistication in reckoning with suffering. It reinforced a destructive approach to purity.

I recommend Anna Jansz's life, not just her death, to Christian readers. When the lives of Christians are bound up with scripture they will often be wounded by the loss of some promised future. This is not only because they misinterpret the text, but also because scripture itself contains within it this sense of loss and its resolution. Returning to these places of burden and difficulty can seed the growth of wisdom in scripture's readers as it did for Jansz. But such transformations, before the eschaton, will be partial and provisional. The irritation of scripture's dissonances will remain and the recontextualized readings will themselves occasion other excesses and failures. Jansz's writings are a vision of the limits and possibilities of this life with scripture. On human lips, as in human lives, scripture chafes. Such irritation will not cease until Christ comes again. But Jansz tended the painful gap between God's speech and hers. This is how wisdom grows.

~

In Anna Jansz we glimpse the Spirit intervening to tend the wounds of failure, enabling scripture to speak hope again after loss. The next chapter explores the life of the emancipated preacher John Jea. Jea displays a tenacious hope analogous to Jansz's. However, his difficulty is far greater. Where Jansz's complex struggles with scripture emerged in part out of her own misreading, Jea is born into a world of slavery in which scripture is interwoven. His life is a picture not just of struggle with the ordinary difficulties of scriptural promises, but the wound of the Bible's entanglement with fallen human social life.

Chapter 4

Can the Talking Book Sing Freedom? The Embodiment of Scripture in the Liberation of John Jea

In 1849, abolitionists in New York met to debate a novel strategy in the fight against slavery: flooding the South with Bibles. An odd initiative, perhaps, but one that excited several nights of discussion among the luminaries of the movement, culminating in rhetorical clashes between Frederick Douglass and Henry Highland Garnet, among others.[323] The content of the Bible was not at issue. Both sides agreed that, in Douglass' words, "the Bible and Slavery are at war with each other."[324] For Garnet, this meant that any spread of biblical literacy could not but excite further support for abolition and prompt slaves to seek their freedom. But Douglass charged that the plan would be fruitless at best. If the scheme operated in secret, how would it overcome widespread illiteracy among the enslaved? Douglass joked that one of his interlocuters, Henry Bibb, told him that "if the slave had the Bible, the Lord would help him to read it."[325] The audience responded with laughter. On the other hand, Douglass continued, if the program proceeded openly and with the consent of the slaveholders, such agreement could only be "purchased at the expense of the silence of the person giving the Bible to his slave."[326]

---

[323] For secondary accounts of the debate and historical context, see Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 21-25; Vincent Wimbush, *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Structures* (Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 262-264; Janet Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991) 125-141.
[324] Frederick Douglass, "Too Much Religion, Too Little Humanity: An Address Delivered in New York, New York on 9 May 1849," in ed. John Blassingame, *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 2: 1847-54* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 188.
[325] Douglass, "Too Much Religion, Too Little Humanity," 184.
[326] Ibid., 187.

For Garnet and others who advocated in favor of the proposal, an encounter with the liberating word of scripture could not but emancipate. But for Douglass, practical problems pointed to a deeper issue: the liberating word could only arrive through the mechanisms of slavery. Mediated thus, "the words of life could deal death," as Allen Dwight Callahan has put it.[327] For Douglass, the whole scheme got the question of freedom and Christianity backward. Abolitionists, he charged, must "*give the slave himself, as the only condition upon which he could really own a Bible."*[328] First freedom must come, then the Bible could be read rightly.

On the practical feasibility of this plan to bring Bibles to the South, Douglass was undoubtedly correct. But Douglass' deeper concern opens onto a fundamental question of hermeneutics, oppression, and moral formation. Douglass worried that enslaved people who received the Bible would simply be conscripted into their masters' worldview of biblically sanctioned racial hierarchy. Slavery presented this problem acutely, but it is a dilemma present at many times and places. The Bible is always mediated by finite and fallen exemplars. Consider the role of David Joris, briefly touched on in the last chapter, in intensifying Anna Jansz's conviction that scripture's promises would be immediately fulfilled. In that chapter we saw how the perennial difficulty of speaking scriptural promises truthfully depends on the acquisition of practical wisdom—something enabled or hindered by the nature and form of one's community.

The present chapter's difficulty is less ordinary and more intense: scripture is not only difficult because it requires practical wisdom in general, it is difficult also because it is bound up with profound evils in human history. Because scripture circulates in human communities, it is entangled with the modes of domination within those communities. If readers of scripture embed

---

[327] Callahan, *The Talking Book,* 25.
[328] Frederick Douglass, "Rev. Henry H. Garnet," *The North Star,* August 17, 1849, page 2. Emphasis original.

themselves in the Bible's stories, will they in turn be embedded in those modes of domination? To put this in the language I developed in my first and second chapters: when Christian scripture wounds its readers, can it also form them well?

This problem extends to every reader of scripture with trauma occasioned by scripture's misuse, but it is a question posed most acutely in the context of nineteenth-century Atlantic slavery and Christianity. In this chapter, then, I provide a close reading of the 1816 autobiography of John Jea, a formerly enslaved preacher from Calabar in what is now Nigeria. Scripture is relentlessly central in Jea's *Life* both as a tool of oppression and a path toward liberation. Jea's biography provides a fitting case study to display the intermingling of biblical interpretation, oppression, and moral formation.[329] First, in what follows, I place Jea in the context of the racialized slavery of the modern Atlantic world. Then I turn to Jea's narrative and his collection of hymns. After this, I provide an account of Jea's moral formation in relation to scripture against the backdrop of modern Atlantic slavery. Finally, I wrestle with the question of Jea's liberation in conversation with contemporary theological and philosophical reflections on race, colonialism, and the limits of freedom.

If in the previous chapter Anna Jansz was wounded by her disappointed scriptural apocalypticism, John Jea is wounded much more literally. In the mouth of his master, scripture enjoins the lashes he receives. Rather than any single passage, Jea encounters the Bible as an object and discourse that his oppressors wield against him. The Bible, embedded in worlds of

---

[329] For the historian John Saillant, Jea's *Life* "provides one of the fullest accounts of a slave's adoption of Christianity and the deployment of religion as a tool for liberation." "John Jea," *Encyclopedia of African American History: 1619-1865,* ed, Paul Finkelman (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006), 214. And for the historian Graham Hodges, Jea is notable for being "among the first of the African-American ministers" of the Second great Awakening "to combine the sacred and the political in sermons and song." Graham Russell Hodges, *Black Itinerants of the Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea and George White* (Madison House Publishers: Madison, WI, 1993), 166.

slavery, embeds him in slavery too. Those twisted enactments of scripture wound Jea. How then can scripture form him as a person of equal worth and dignity?

Jea answers that question through the way he narrates his *Life,* inter-weaving the autobiographical patterns of God-given liberation with the fabric of scripture. Jea's narrative demonstrates that it is precisely scripture's embeddedness in human history that provides both its capacity to harm and its capacity to heal. In living and narrating his story, Jea takes the texts that were used against him and freely embodies them otherwise. In the *Life,* the Spirit rests on John Jea, quickening him to attunement with the rhythms of scripture beyond the stultifying idolatry of his former enslavers. Jea's *Life* is not a vindication of the Christian tradition. Rather, it is an invitation to his readers: will Christians join Jea in his freedom?

4.1 Slavery and Racial Capitalism in the Christian Atlantic

In his groundbreaking 1972 work of history and political economy, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa,* the Guyanese critic Walter Rodney described modern racism as emerging from and alongside the mass enslavement of Africans, rather than preceding it as some free-floating conceptual system.

> Occasionally, it is mistakenly held that Europeans enslaved Africans for racist reasons. European planters and miners enslaved Africans for economic reasons, so that their labor power could be exploited. Indeed, it would have been impossible to open up the New World and to use it as a constant generator of wealth, had it not been for African labor. There were no other alternatives: the American (Indian) population was virtually wiped out and Europe's population was too small for settlement overseas at that time. Then, having become utterly dependent on African labor, Europeans at home and abroad found it necessary to rationalize that exploitation in racist terms as well. Oppression follows logically from exploitation, so as to guarantee the latter. Oppression

> of African people on purely racial grounds accompanied, strengthened, and became indistinguishable from oppression for economic reasons.[330]

For Rodney, as for the Black Marxist tradition more broadly, racism and capitalism are intertwined *material* realities, first and foremost. This is captured neatly in Cedric Robinson's term "racial capitalism." Racism, on this view, should not be understood primarily as a set of attitudes and prejudices that then generated various inequities and oppressions. Rather, modern capitalism developed in such a way that "racialism"—the social construction of racial difference—enabled capital to extract value more easily from labor.[331] This is not to say that early modern Europeans were not prejudiced against Africans, or that such prejudice played no role in the emergence of modern slavery. Rather, on this view, racism in its systematic and modern form emerged from and alongside slavery as a practice of systematic economic exploitation. Such an account enables us to see that the enslavement of John Jea happened not as some unfortunate result of prejudice, but rather as a fundamental expression of the emerging economic and social order of the colonial Atlantic world.

In this section I describe how premodern slavery became racialized during European colonialism and how Christian justifications for slavery mutated alongside that economic shift. With this racialization of slavery in view, I also situate the genre of slave narratives like Jea's as a rebuke of this transformed world and its twisted scriptural moorings. In other words, this section narrates the marriage between the Bible and modern racialized slavery. The *Life* of John Jea narrated in the following section is one story of its divorce.

---

[330] Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1972), 88-89.
[331] Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* 3rd edition (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Chapel Hill, 1983, 2020), 2.

4.1.1 Racializing slavery, killing baptism

Powerful economic factors drove the rise of slavery in the colonial Atlantic. In the fifteenth century, Portugal settled the Atlantic islands of Madeira, the Canaries, and São Tomé. There they slowly developed one of the formulas that would drive European expansion across the Atlantic: plantations operated by West African slaves.[332] Near the end of the fifteenth century, Madeira overtook Cyprus as the leading producer of sugar, though it still resembled Mediterranean sugar production in terms of its technology and mixed slave- and free-labor system.[333] However, by the time the Portuguese expanded into São Tomé and ramped up its sugar capacity in the early sixteenth century, it closely resembled "what would become the American norm" in Brazil, the Caribbean, and eventually the American South.[334] Soon Spain, then France, England, and other European powers would pursue this same model of large-scale plantations, producing cash crops with labor from conscripted West Africans throughout the colonized Atlantic world. The most extreme expressions of this model would be implemented on Caribbean islands like Hispaniola where Europeans eradicated the native populations entirely and imported entirely African slave labor.

---

[332] Jeremy Black, *The Atlantic Slave Trade in World History* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 20.
[333] Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 2nd edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 14.
[334] Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade,* 14. The development of São Tomé points also to the intertwining of antisemitism with modern racism. The Portuguese authorities initially settled the island with a mixture of Portuguese convicts and Jewish children. These children were forcibly taken from their parents as part of a program of reducing the perceived threat of Portugal's relatively large Jewish population—many of whom had been deported to Portugal from Castile in the expulsions of 1492. However, most of the descendants of these initial conscripted settlers would not be enslaved, unlike most of the descendants of the conscripted West Africans. Antisemitism was linked to modern racism, then, but would ultimately diverge in form. So, for example, accusations of "crypto-Judaism" would be used later in fights among the island's political elite. See Arlindo Manuel Caldeira, "Learning the Ropes in the Tropics: Slavery and the Plantation System on the Island of São Tomé," *African Economic History*, 39 (2011): 39-42. For the latter point, see Robert Garfield, "Public Christians, Secret Jews: Religion and Political Conflict on Sao Tome Island in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 21/4 (Winter, 1990): 645-654.

The legal and religious elements of this system at times struggled to keep pace with its economic reality. In the medieval and early modern Mediterranean and European worlds, slavery had been a result of conquest, debt bondage, and trade, and tended to be both temporary and closely linked with religion. So, in the early modern Mediterranean, Muslim states and raiders would capture and trade in Christian slaves or slaves from the African interior, while Christian states and raiders would do the same for Muslims. To take one example, when a Spanish expeditionary force seized the major North African trading port of Tunis in 1535, they freed thousands of Christian slaves held there and enslaved the local Muslim population in turn.[335] Slavery was thus part of the Christian world, but before the modern period it had an ethnic and religious rather than racial character.

Indeed, for the Christian tradition slavery had long been seen as regrettable but necessary after Eden. In what would become a classic account, Augustine held in *The City of God* that slavery is outside of God's original, created perfection. "The first cause of slavery," he writes, "is sin.[336]" In Eden, humanity only exercised dominion over "irrational creatures."[337] However, after the fall, God used slavery as a merciful chastening to bring about a minimum of social order. It was both a punishment for sin and a tool for the ordering of the world. While, for Augustine, slavery was not a natural feature of human life per se (*pace* Aristotle), it was a routine and tragically beneficial divine ordering after the Fall. But this does not make slavery an incidental feature of Augustine's thought. As Matthew Elia and other recent commentators have argued, slavery is a central organizing metaphor for Augustine. In Augustine's *Confessions,* for example,

---

[335] Jeremy Black, *The Atlantic Slave Trade in World History,* 13.
[336] Augustine, *The City of God.* Translated by William Babcock (New York: New City Press, 2013) XIX.5.
[337] Augustine, *The City of God,* XIX.5.

God is figured essentially as the master of Augustine's runaway soul. "Augustine looks upon the body of the fugitive slave and finds his own restless soul staring back."[338] Slavery might be regrettable and a result of sin, for Augustine and many after him, but it remained both an inescapable metaphor for the Christian soul's journey home to God, and a necessary way to maintain social order in human affairs until the eschaton.

Ilaria Ramelli has recently argued that the few patristic authors with a clear anti-slavery position—Gregory of Nyssa, the Syriac monastic Aphrahat, and perhaps Origen of Alexandria—are united by a common tradition of asceticism which itself relies on the metaphor of slavery. For Gregory of Nyssa, as Ramelli puts it, "Christian perfection coincides with being God's slave."[339] This should hardly surprise. In the New Testament, Christ's own perfection is bound up with his slave-like humility. Not grasping equality, Christ took "the form of a slave" (Philippians 2:7). We will return to this problem of how to understand scripture's entanglement with slavery in this chapter's third section.

Out of this historic entanglement, modern Atlantic Christianity slowly developed a racialized rather than merely ethnic and religious conception of slavery. Early on in the colonial period, differences between Catholic and Protestant approaches emerged, and here I primarily follow the course of Protestant trends. The Catholic colonial powers tended to encourage baptism of both African slaves and Native Americans much sooner than Protestant rulers, describing slavery as part of a civilizing process. The Protestant colonial powers tended at first to avoid conversion and instead continued to maintain religious difference as a justification for

---

[338] Matthew Elia, "Ethics in the Afterlife of Slavery: Race, Augustinian Politics, and the Problem of the Christian Master," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 38/2 (2018): 102.
[339] Ilaria Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery: The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from Ancient Judaism to Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 189.

subjugation.[340] Because of this, colonial authorities debated whether baptism would result in manumission for enslaved Africans. In two separate legal cases in 1677, for example—*Butts v. Penny* and *Lowe v. Elton*—courts in England determined that enslaved Africans could be treated as fungible property (for the purposes of "trover" lawsuits) because, as non-Christians, they possessed no rights.[341] But the court also held that this would be, "untill they become Christians; and thereby they are infranchised [*sic*]."[342] Such cases simultaneously strengthened the legality of the slave trade while leaving its ideological foundations somewhat obscure. Would baptism truly emancipate?

In the early seventeenth century, this confused legal and ideological landscape created an atmosphere in which Protestant slave owners justified slavery on the grounds of religious superiority but withheld conversion as a possibility for slaves. As the historian Katharine Gerbner puts it in her study of the Protestant Caribbean from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, "Christianity increasingly became used as an ethnic indicator, juxtaposed with the word 'negro.'…The taxonomy provided an implicit justification for slavery by suggesting that 'negroes' were 'heathen' and thus could be legitimately enslaved."[343] In the 1657 travel diary of his trip to Barbados, for example, the English author Richard Ligon encountered an enslaved African who asked for help getting baptized. When Ligon took this up with a wealthy English

---

[340] As the historian Katharine Gerbner argues, "Anticonversion sentiment was one of the defining features of Protestant slave societies in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries." *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 3.
[341] Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 23. In the case of *Butts v. Penny*, the issue was not the legality of slavery as such, but rather whether enslaved Africans could be used in a "trover" case to recompense for the value of wrongfully destroyed property. The plaintiff won; slaves were mere property.
[342] *Butts v. Penny* (1677). *English Reports Full Reprint Vol. 84 - King's Bench*, 1011. Accessed online through the *Commonwealth Legal Information Institute.* Two different summaries of the trials, in two different collections, exist. They may be accessed here: <http://www.commonlii.org/uk/cases/EngR/1685/563.pdf> and here: < http://www.commonlii.org/uk/cases/EngR/1793/213.pdf>.
[343] Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 42.

landowner on the island, he was told that the slave could not be baptized, since it would result in manumission.[344]

Across the colonizing American world, the Protestant planter class mapped the boundary between slave and free onto the binary between "heathen" and "Christian." But pressure grew from missionaries to baptize willing slaves. In addition, the English and Dutch captured colonies with large populations of baptized slaves as a result of war with France and Spain in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. If the economic exploitation of enslaved Africans was to continue, its ideological foundation required adjustment. Thus, the conjoined pairs "heathen/slave and Christian/free" bled into a new fully racialized binary of "Black/slave and white/free." As Gerbner puts it, "by the end of the seventeenth century, the term 'white' had begun to replace 'Christian' as an indicator of mastery and freedom."[345]

Faced with the possible emancipation of baptized slaves, in the late seventeenth century colonial legislatures began to clarify the relationship between baptism and freedom.[346] In 1664 the General Assembly of the colony of Maryland passed an act affirming that slaves would serve "Durante Vita [for life]" and while the act did not mention conversion specifically, the member who offered the bill did so "for the prvencon [prevention] of the damage Masters of such Slaves may susteyne by such Slaves pretending to be Christened And soe pleade the lawe of England

---

[344] For, the landowner said, "the people of that Island were governed by the Laws of England, and by those Laws, we could not make a Christian a Slave…being once a Christian, he could no more account him a Slave, and so lose the hold they had of them as Slaves." Richard Ligon, *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados,* edited by Karen Ordahl Upperman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2011), 101. Quoted in Gerbner, *Christian Slavery,* 13.
[345] Gerbner, *Christian Slavery,* 11.
[346] "By 1706 at least six colonial legislatures had passed acts denying that baptism altered the condition of a slave 'as to his bondage or freedome' [*sic*]" Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum American South,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, 2004), 99.

[*sic*]."[347] Three years later in 1667 the General Assembly of Virginia passed into law a more explicit iteration of the same principle, stating that "the conferring of baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage," a decision which the Assembly hoped would enable "the propagation of Christianity."[348] Two years later the Fundamental Constitution that provided the basis for the colonial regime in the Carolinas specified that slavery was based on race, not religion. "Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever."[349] The Huguenot missionary Elias Neau lobbied strongly for a 1706 law in New York titled "An Act to Encourage the Baptizing of Negro, Indian, and Mulatto Slaves." This law not only specified that baptism would not be grounds for manumission, but also that slavery was hereditary for people of color.[350] These rulings established the legal foundations of slavery as a permanent and racialized building block of Christian society in the Protestant Americas.

However, as Jea's narrative will demonstrate, even once the possible link between baptism and manumission was firmly severed in law, it lingered in perceptions of Christianity's requirements among both the enslaved and those who claimed ownership of them. Indeed, it seems at times that the missionaries themselves were the ones most convinced of the absence of such a link. Even if the class of slave-owning planters could be assuaged in their fears about

---

[347] William H. Browne, ed., *Archives of Maryland: Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly of Maryland, January 1637/8–September 1664* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1883), 526. Accessed at: <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc2900/sc2908/000001/000001/html/am1--526.html> Also quoted in Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 87.
[348] *The Statutes at Large: Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia*, ed. William Waller Henning, 1823, 260. Accessed at < https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Statutes_at_Large.html?id=EDYwAAAAYAAJ> Also quoted in Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, 88.
[349] *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, March 1, 1669, article 110. (Yale Law School, Avalon Project) Accessed at: <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/nc05.asp>
[350] New York (State). *Acts of Assembly, Passed in the Province of New-York, from 1691, to 1718*. London, Printed by John Baskett. 81.

baptized slaves claiming emancipation, they still feared the effects of evangelization, and many resisted it until abolition was completed in the late nineteenth century.[351] As Albert Raboteau puts in his classic study American slavery and Christianity, "almost every apologist for the evangelization of the slaves felt obliged to prove that Christianity would actually make better slaves."[352] Edmund Gibson, the Bishop of London and adviser to Sir Robert Walpole, British Prime Minister, wrote a pastoral letter in 1727 making exactly this point. "The freedom which Christianity gives is a freedom from the bondage of sin and Satan…but as to their outward condition, whatever that was before, whether bond or free, their being baptized, and becoming Christians, makes no manner of change in it," and indeed, "it lays them under stronger obligations to perform those duties."[353]

Such missionary apologetics were always put to the test in the wake of regular slave revolts. After a small uprising in 1712 in New York, the colonial Assembly passed a law increasing various penalties for crimes committed by enslaved Africans and stipulating that they could not gather in groups larger than three people or move about after sunset.[354] Only six years prior that Assembly had passed a law encouraging slave conversion, prompted by the missionary Elias Neau. Neau was convinced that these increased legal restrictions targeted his missionary

---

[351] Katharine Gerbner relates an encounter between Quaker missionaries and skeptical colonial authorities in Barbados. "When William Edmundson, a Quaker minister who visited the island in 1675, was berated by an Anglican minister named Ramsey and subsequently by Governor Atkins for 'making the Negroes Christians, and [making] them rebel and cut their Throats,' Edmundson replied that 'it was a good Work to bring them to the Knowledge of God and Christ Jesus, and to believe in him that died for them, and for all Men, and that would keep them from rebelling or cutting any Man's Throat.'" Gerbner, *Christian Slavery,* 67.
[352] Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion,* 103.
[353] Gibson, *Two Letters,* (London, 1727), 10-11. Quoted in Jeremy Black, *The Atlantic Slave Trade in World History,* 58.
[354] Gerbner, *Christian Slavery,* 120-122.

efforts, which relied on now prohibited after-dark meetings.[355] When Jea was brought to New York half a century later, these same laws would hamper his early ministry.

Even after the legal question was resolved, in the world of modern Atlantic slavery there was a fundamental ambivalence about what baptism accomplished. These rulings had killed baptism's power to emancipate, and yet the link persisted, as we will see in the story of Jea's own strange and miraculous emancipation. Such a link was at best "legally vague," and yet "widely believed," as Raboteau puts it.[356]

4.1.2 Jea's Calabar

John Jea was trafficked to North America at the very peak of the slave trade, though his destination would be somewhat unusual. The end of the eighteenth century marked the highest sustained levels of trafficking of Africans to the Americas. In the 1760s and 1770s alone, slave traders forced 1.3 million West Africans across the Atlantic, out of an estimated total of around 12 million between 1500 and 1888 (when slavery ended in Brazil).[357] The vast majority of these enslaved people were sent to South America, the Caribbean, and the American South. Of the slaves shipped to the Unites States, in 1790 for example, 94 percent went to the southern states.[358] Jea, arriving as a child in New York, was caught up into the very height of this mass trans-continental movement. But he landed on the northernmost edge of that flow. Rather than at a

---

[355] Ibid. In the same vein, anti-literacy laws sprang up across the American south in the wake of slave revolts in the early 19th century Between 1830 and 1865, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi all had level of restriction on teaching slaves, especially reading—though enforcement varied. See Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear*, 33-36.
[356] Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 98.
[357] Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 46.
[358] Ibid., 44.

large sugar, coffee, or cotton plantation as was the norm from Virginia to Brazil, he became a slave on a small farm in New York.

John Jea's own context of origin highlights the changes wrought by the slave trade on the West African coast. Jea writes in his narrative that he was "born in the town of Old Callabar [*sic*], in Africa, in the year 1773."[359] At just "two years and a half old, I and my father, mother, brothers, and sisters, were stolen, and conveyed to North America, and sold for slaves" (3). On the southeastern coast of present-day Nigeria, Calabar sits on an estuary produced by the confluence of the Cross and Calabar rivers. It formed a major hub for the Atlantic slave trade. Between 1650 and 1838, around 275,000 slaves were sold in the Calabar area to European traders.[360] Between 1750 and 1775 alone—the 25-year peak period in which Jea was sold—62,000 slaves were shipped from Calabar across the Atlantic.[361]

This heavy traffic was bought with blood. The Calabar area had been dominated by small fishing villages for centuries, but the slave trade brought about its transformation into several small towns—chiefly, Duke Town and Old Town—that extended control over the whole area. In 1767, just six years before John Jea's birth, the captains and crews of several British slave ships coordinated with the men of Duke Town to conduct a surprise attack against Old Town.[362] This event helped solidify the status of Duke Town as the premier power in the region, backed up by

---

[359] John Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself* (Portsea, 1816), 3. Made available at *Documenting the American South*, University of North Carolina, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jeajohn/jeajohn.html>. Jea's narrative may also be found in Graham Russell Hodges, *Black Itinerants of the Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea and George White* (Madison House Publishers: Madison, WI, 1993) and Henry Louis Gates Jr., and William Andrews, ed., *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment 1772-1815* (Washington, DC: Civitas Counterpoint Press, 1998).
[360] Stephen D. Behrendt, A. J. H. Latham, and David Northup ed., *The Diary of Antera Duke, An Eighteenth Century African Slaver*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 48.
[361] Randy Sparks, *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth Century Odyssey* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 39.
[362] For a narrative account, see Sparks *The Two Princes of Calabar*, 10-25.

closer trading ties to the British.[363] As elsewhere, the slave trade fueled conflict and power consolidation among West African communities. The same event illustrates the competition within the British half of the trading relationship. Where before, London and Bristol traders had been the dominant traders, this event helped cement the supremacy of Liverpool slave shipping among Calabar traders, as it was Liverpool ship captains who had personal relationships with the traders of Duke Town. Half a century later, Jea would preach in Liverpool and Portsmouth to congregations of working-class port workers and sailors, many of them involved in the slave trade during the early 1800s until its abolition in 1807.[364]

One of the African traders in Calabar kept a diary that gives us a picture of what enslavement would have been like for Jea. Antera Duke wrote daily accounts of his life in the 1780s. These constitute the earliest written historical account from an African in Calabar. Duke's role was to buy slaves and food from other traders further inland, who would themselves enslave people through raiding or debt bondage. Here is a normal trading day for Antera Duke from January 28, 1785, about a decade after John Jea would have been sold across the sea.

> About 6 a.m. at Aqua Landing, a fine morning. I worked in my small yard. After 2 o'clock in the afternoon we two went on board Captain Smale's ship with 3 slaves. He took two slaves and we came back.[365]

Duke likely sold around ten thousand slaves to European traders in this fashion over the course of a forty-year career.[366] Given his dominance in Calabar trading, there is a reasonable possibility that John Jea himself would have passed through Antera Duke's hands in this precise way: an ordinary transaction on "a fine morning" at Aqua Landing that would see Jea step off the African

---

[363] *The Diary of Antera Duke,* 23.
[364] See Ryan Hanley, *Beyond Slavery and Abolition: Black British Writing c. 1770-1830* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 144-46.
[365] *The Diary of Antera Duke,* 137.
[366] Ibid., 68.

continent forever and begin a childhood of bondage to white Europeans. We know few details about Jea's background beyond this point of origin at the heart of the slave trade. He was one of thousands.[367] At the age of two and a half, John Jea had already had much of his world stripped away from him.

4.1.3 Slave narratives in rhetorical context

In his *Life*, Jea claimed a place for himself in the face of this de-humanization. He was not alone; in writing his narrative, Jea joined a literary conversation about the humanity of Africans. The German philosopher Georg Friedrich Hegel provides a clear illustration of the rhetorical challenge Jea and other diasporic Africans wrote against. For Hegel, as for so many of his race and class, Africa was "the land of childhood" perpetually trapped on the "threshold of the world's history" but never passing beyond it into civilization.[368] Hegel believed that Africans lacked "the category of universality" and so were incapable of self-realization.[369] Because Africans were "capable of no development…the only essential connection that has existed and

---

[367] One parallel story offers resonance and contrast with Jea's own life. In the massacre of 1767 in which residents of Duke Town worked with several English slave ships to kill around 400 men from Old Town, two prominent sons of Old Town's merchant class were kidnapped by the English, added to their existing cargo of slaves, and sold in Dominica in the Caribbean. These brothers—Little Ephraim Robin John and Ancona Robin Robin John—then embarked on a multi-year saga to return home. They were trafficked to Virginia under false pretenses and served as slaves to a ship's captain before escaping on to a ship bound for Bristol, only to have the ship's captain attempt to sell them into slavery once more. Friends brought suit against the ship's captain and the brothers won—thanks to the precedent just set in 1772 in Somerset v Stewart—and the brothers were freed. In Bristol they struck up a close friendship with Charles Wesley (details from their life come mostly from letters they exchanged with his circle) and converted to Christianity. Wesley called them "extraordinary Scholars & Catechumens" and the brothers eventually returned to Calabar. Before their return, one of the brothers had written to Charles Wesley with his concern about how to pay back debts he had accrued to a slaver trader named Thomas Jones who had helped to finance their case and secure their release. Ephraim wrote to Wesley "if we must not sell slaves I know not how we shall pay." The brothers returned to Callabar as committed Methodists just a year after Jea made the Middle Passage. There is no record of whether or not they continued their family business. For a detailed recreation of their story, see Sparks, *Two Princes of Calabar*. For the letters, see Charles Wesley, letter to Mr. William Perronet, January 23, 1774, quoted in Sparks, *Princes of Calabar,* 117; and Little Ephraim Robin John to Charles Wesley, August 27, 1774, quoted in Sparks, *Princes of Calabar,* 130.

[368] G.W. F. Hegel *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Volume 1: Manuscripts of the Introduction and the Lectures of 1822-3*. Translated by Brown and Hodgson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 109, 117.

[369] Hegel, *The Philosophy of History,* 110.

continued" between Africans and Europeans could be, he says, "that of slavery."[370] Such a relation was, for Hegel, a mercy. Mute and unintelligible, Hegel's imagined African subject is cut off from the progress of humanity's self-realization —unless a long and slow tutorial at the hands of white masters can teach selfhood.[371]

Jea and so many like him wrote to prove their humanity against this European world of polite letters that had consigned them to bondage. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. summarizes, narratives of slavery and emancipation were the "central arena in which persons of African descent could establish and redefine their status within the human community" so that they might be seen as a "speaking subject."[372] Jea and others wrote, and wrote *about* their literacy, to claim their freedom and demonstrate their humanity to a ruling class that demanded such evidence but refused to acknowledge it.

For Gates, the challenge and promise of claiming humanity is nowhere more visible in the genre of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Black writing than in the trope of the "talking book." The "talking book" is a literary device repeated in many slave narratives and it plays a pivotal role in Jea's own text. In its most common form, the subject of a slave narrative encounters the Bible (or a prayer book), sees that it "talks" to his masters and will try to make the book talk to him as well. It does not. This reflects Hegel's sense of the African world: humans who are not yet capable of being addressed. The trope figures the line between civilization and

---

[370] Hegel, *The Philosophy of History,* 116.
[371] Hegel allows that the slave trade might end—he writes after the British abolition of slavery and the slave trade, and could hardly deny that it would end—but insists that slavery serves a pedagogical function, ushering them on to the stage of world history whose progress he spent his career defining. He states, in an argument for the continuation or at most very slow abolition of slavery, "Slavery is itself a phase of advance…a phase of education—a mode of becoming participant in a higher morality and the culture connected with it. Slavery is in and for itself *injustice,* for the essence of humanity is *freedom;* but for this man must be matured. The gradual abolition of slavery is therefore wiser and more equitable than its sudden removal." Ibid., 117.
[372] Gates, "Introduction" in Henry Louis Gates Jr., and William Andrews, ed., *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic,* 2.

barbarism, between masterhood and slavery, and between Christian and pagan. But unlike Hegel's construal, in each of these narratives that line is crossed. The narrator eventually achieves literacy and becomes a subject capable not only of reading, but also of writing their own life. The formerly enslaved narrator makes the "talking book" speak.

A few examples here will clarify the way the trope works for Jea's *Life.* The first use of the trope in a slave narrative was the 1772 autobiography of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, who also went by James Albert. Gronniosaw narrates slavery as a pedagogy that civilizes him. The decisive moment of this pedagogy comes in his encounter with a book that talks. Seeing his master "talking" with the book, Gronniosaw bides his time, and then

> When nobody saw me, I open'd it and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it wou'd say something to me; but was very sorry and greatly disappointed when I found it would not speak, this thought immediately presented itself to me, that every body and every thing despis'd me because I was black. [373]

Gronniosaw eventually learns to read and converts to Christianity, and his master frees him upon his death, whereupon he leads a difficult and impoverished life, mostly in England.

John Marrant provides a curious reversal of this trope. In 1785, Marrant, a freeborn Black man from New York wrote a narrative of his captivity among the Cherokee of South Carolina. His narrative takes up the trope of the "talking book" again, but it is he who makes the book speak, and the Cherokee who cannot. Marrant is brought to a Cherokee settlement and sentenced to death, but avoids this by miraculously speaking in Cherokee without prior instruction. Upon being taken into the presence of a Cherokee king, the king's eldest daughter took the Bible he had

---

[373] James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (Bath, 1772), 10. Accessed at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/gronniosaw/gronnios.html>

in his hand and "kissed it."[374] Marrant then reads Isaiah 53 and Matthew 26. When the king's daughter takes up the Bible, she "kissed it again…but said, with much sorrow, the book would not speak to her."[375] Marrant reinforces the civilizational divide but claims a place within its privileged half.

The Black British abolitionist Ottobah Cugoano took up the trope as well in his 1787 treatise against slavery, but did so to undermine it. When Cugoano outlines the crimes of European colonialism against the native peoples of the Americas, he relates the story of the Inca Emperor Atahualpa's treatment at the hands of Francisco Pizarro. Upon hearing Vicente Valverde, a priest, articulate the claims of the expedition, Atahualpa is indignant that the Spanish would demand his political and religious subordination.

> He desired to know where Valverde had learned things so extraordinary. In this book, replied the fanatic Monk, reaching out his breviary. The Inca opened it eagerly, and turning over the leaves, lifted it to his ear: This, says he, is silent; it tells me nothing; and threw it with disdain to the ground. The enraged father of ruffians, turning towards his countrymen, the assassinators, cried out, To arms, Christians, to arms; the word of God is insulted; avenge this profanation on these impious dogs.[376]

For Cugoano the trope is a horrific farce. The mute book has no power over Atahualpa and it is *this* that enrages the Spanish, whose rampage of violence belies their devotion to a truly silent book.

---

[374] John Marrant, *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black, (now going to Preach the Gospel in Nova-Scotia),* (London, 1785), 25.
[375] Marrant, *Narrative,* 26.
[376] Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery: and Commerce of the Human Species* (London, 1787), 80-1. Accessed at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eccodemo/K046227.0001.001?view=toc> Quoted in Gates, *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic* 16-17. Gates speculates that Cuguano's source is Inca Garcilaso de la Vega's *Comentarios Reales de los Incas.* Curiously, however, de la Vega tells this story only to assert its falsehood. De la Vega insists that "it is not true what some historians report of Atahualpa" and then recounts the story. Vega, *The Royal Commentaries of Peru* (Lisbon, 1609) translated by Paul Rycaut, 1685, 456.

Two years later in 1789, Olaudah Equiano published his autobiography, which would become one of the most widely read slave narratives and define the genre for later writers. Equiano seems to repeat the trope much as Gronniosaw first relates it.

> I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent.[377]

For Gates, Equiano's use of the trope is no mere repetition, but a creative renewal that signals to the reader Equiano's current status—in the moment of reading—as an author, a speaker, and subject—no longer one for whom books are silent. His narrative marks a self-aware acknowledgement of the transition from "slave to potential freedman, from an absence to a presence, and indeed from an object to a subject."[378] As I will narrate in the next section, Jea's own narrative employs the trope to the same effect, though with a twist that undermines his master's claim to make the talking book speak at all. In the process, as we will see, Jea's *Life* complicates the significance of literacy.

This genre of slave narratives can be read as a collection of overlapping and conflicting answers to the same question that colonial legislatures worked out in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: what difference does conversion make? For those colonial legislatures, as I have outlined above, conversion and baptism made no difference at all. But for Jea and other authors of these narratives, conversion and baptism heralded a new creation. This new creation would not imply only individual transformation but cosmic renewal as well, as in the broadest

---

[377] Olaudah Equiano, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself (London, 1789), 106-7. Accessed at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/equiano1/equiano1.html>
[378] Gates, *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic*, 22.

sense of 2 Corinthians 5:17: "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!" For Jea, baptism transformed not only himself but the whole world. His miraculous encounter with the "talking book" would enable him to "read" all creation anew in the light of Christ.

Finally, three historical movements shape the contours of Jea's encounter with new creation through scripture. The historian Graham Hodges has argued that Methodist evangelicalism, republican egalitarianism, and a nascent Black nationalism define the themes of Jea's mature ministry.[379] As for the first of these three, Jea fits firmly in the tradition of itinerant ministry that characterized early Methodism. The Methodist revival—as part of the larger Second Great Awakening in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—relied heavily on itinerant preachers and open-air gatherings. This, combined with Methodism's early openness to Black members, initially attracted a significant number of free and enslaved African-Americans. "Methodism's widespread use of itinerants enhanced black religious practices and services. Methodism did not require stationary preachers and churches, a necessary convenience to blacks whose assemblages were still restricted by law."[380] In addition, the relative antislavery of early Methodism, in conjunction with its tendency toward British loyalism rather than American patriotism, proved attractive.[381] A number of "Black Loyalists" who fought for the British during the American Revolutionary War were affiliated with Methodism, many of whom were resettled by the British in Nova Scotia after the war. The narrative of John Marrant noted above describes such a life. But at the same time, a rising tide of Black nationalism, combined with the

---

[379] Graham Russell Hodges, *Black Itinerants of the Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea and George White* (Madison House Publishers: Madison, WI, 1993), 1.
[380] Hodges, *Black Itinerants,* 5.
[381] Ibid., 4.

institutionalization of racism within the emerging formal structures of Methodism spurred the creation of Black Protestant denominations, the largest of which was and remains the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. John Jea lived during this period, when the home that Methodism had provided was ending. Richard Allen, an influential founder of the AME, was establishing his independent African Methodist congregation in Philadelphia in the 1790s. The AME was formally established in 1816, the same year Jea would publish his narrative. However, Jea would not participate in this denomination-building; his itineracy took him to England.

However, we will misunderstand Jea if we reduce him to any single dynamic or even a combination of these. I am guided in my reading of Jea's *Life* by Paul Gilroy's notion of the "Black Atlantic" as a hybrid space. Against romantic conceptions of national identity—both a monolithic account of Western civilization as "white" and attempts to forge an essential Black national identity—Gilroy suggests it is more constructive to take the "Atlantic" as a location of historical study that emphasizes the development of hybrid identities.[382] He proposes in his work to focus on individuals who "begin as African Americans or Caribbean people and are then changed into something else which evades those specific labels and with them all fixed notions of nationality and national identity."[383] John Jea exemplifies such hybridity. He began life in West Africa, was enslaved in New York, crossed the Atlantic a dozen times, and ended his narrative by claiming a Christian, African, and British identity. He may not belong entirely to any one world,

---

[382] Historians have "fallen back on the idea of cultural nationalism, on the over integrated conceptions of culture which present immutable, ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories and experiences of 'black' and 'white' people. Against this choice stands another, more difficult opposition: the theorization of creolization…mestizaje, and hybridity," Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 2.
[383] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic,* 19.

but he pieces together an inheritance from several—African-British preacher, Methodist song-writer, republican pacifist.

4.2 Jea's Life

John Jea's *Life* is a sermon whose purpose is the conversion of its readers. The audience of the sermon, I presume, is the white British reader who must learn that slavery is an idolatrous institution and that Africans bear the fullness of human worth and dignity. In the words of one commentator on the genre of slave narratives and Black autobiography, the presumed recipient of texts likes Jea's is the white reader who "needs to learn to read the world redemptively."[384] Jea's carefully crafted life story elicits such a reader's contrition and conversion away from sinful pride and towards a Christianity that acknowledges that God alone is the owner of human lives. Jea's autobiography invites his readers to join him in freedom. And as a hymnodist, Jea structures this invitation as a call to harmonize with the steady melody of scripture.

In what follows, I first describe the documentary history of Jea's *Life,* then provide a close reading of the text. Following this I summarize recurring themes from some of Jea's hymns. Taken altogether, Jea's writings answer this question: how does scripture form those whom it also wounds?

---

[384] William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988). 208. Andrews is speaking of Equiano's autobiography here, but the same applies to Jea's rhetorical purpose.

4.2.1. Documentary history

John Jea published two books near the end of his life. The first is his 1816 autobiography, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, African Preacher*.[385] The second is an 1816 hymnal, *A Collection of Hymns: Compiled and Selected by John Jea, African Preacher of the Gospel,* that includes some of his original compositions. He published both in Portsea, England. These probably did not achieve wide circulation because John Jea was unknown to modern historians until recently. Jea did not feature in the standard anthologies of Black slave autobiographies until Henry Louis Gates rediscovered copies of both of Jea's works in 1983 and 1985.[386] Gates and others verified the authenticity of the texts and located other copies in archives at the University of Oxford. Thanks largely to Gates' work in literary theory, John Jea has achieved a place, albeit still a small one, in the tradition of early modern Black autobiography.[387] From total obscurity, the *Life* of John Jea has become, in Gates' words, a "missing link" that ties together early slave autobiographies—which primarily emphasize religious redemption—with later classics like that of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs that highlight abolition above all.

There are a few other documentary traces of Jea's life. The historian Graham Hodges sorted through New York records and found a Dutch Reformed couple matching Jea's description of the couple who, for a time, were his legal owners in Flatbush, Brooklyn.[388] Also, while Jea did not make an institutional home in any denomination, it appears that several Presbyterian churches

---

[385] There is some dispute about the date of Jea's narrative. See Hodges, *Black Itinerants of the Gospel,* 34.
[386] Colin Campbell, "1816 Hymnal Identified as Work of Ex-Slave," *New York Times,* Feb 21, 1985.
[387] See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 172-182.
[388] Hodges, *Black Itinerants,* 44 fn 57.

in King's County, New York gave him written permission to preach around 1800.[389] Finally, he recorded three marriages within his narrative. He married a fourth time after publishing in 1816; a marriage announcement recorded on October 28, 1816 states that "John Jea, African Preacher, of Portsea" married "Jemima Davis of Drackwell Heath in Hempstead County."[390] St. John's Anglican chapel in Portsea recorded the birth of their child on September 25, 1817.[391] This is the last written trace of his life.

4.2.2 The Life

At the beginning of his narrative Jea gives us no idyllic account of pre-slavery life—as Equiano does in his narrative, for example—but moves immediately to the catastrophic kidnapping. When he was only two, he continues, he and his "father, mother, brothers, and sisters were stolen and conveyed to North America and sold for slaves."[392] They were bought by a master in New York who was "very cruel" and forced them to work long hours with inadequate food. He gives the names of those who bought his family—Oliver and Angelica Triebuen—but henceforth refers to them simply as "master" or "mistress." They and his later owners become figures for all who seek dominion over other human beings.

Jea's early narrative emphasizes not only the brutality of the Triebuens, but also their use of scripture to justify that brutality. Jea always contextualizes these uses of scripture as misuses through his own more adequate readings. After describing prolonged floggings, Jea notes that

---

[389] Guide to the Peter Lowe Correspondence. Brooklyn: Brooklyn Historical Society, 1974), 22, 115. Quoted in John Saillant "Make a Black Life, and Bid It Sing: Sacred Song in *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea*," *Auto/Biography Studies*, 31:1 (2016): 150.
[390] Hodges, *Black Itinerants*, 34.
[391] Ibid.
[392] John Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, African Preacher: Compiled and Written by Himself* (Portsea, England 1815 or 1816), 3. Accessed online through "Documenting the American South," University of North Carolina, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jeajohn/jeajohn.html> Further citations noted parenthetically from the original manuscript as reproduced there..

> we were obliged to thank him for the punishment he had been inflicting on us, quoting that Scripture which saith, 'Bless the rod, and him that hath appointed it.' But, though he was a professor of religion, he forgot that passage which saith 'God is love, and whoso dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.' And, again, we are commanded to love our enemies; but it appeared evident that his wretched heart was hardened; which led us to look up unto him as our god, for we did not know him who is able to deliver and save all who call upon him in truth and sincerity. Conscience, that faithful monitor, (which either excuses or accuses) caused us to groan, cry, and sigh, in a manner which cannot be uttered (4).

The master compelled Jea and his fellow slaves to quote scripture themselves, internalizing a twisted sacred order. And it is indeed twisted. "Bless the rod, and him that hath appointed it" is, at best, a misquotation of the King James Version's rendering of Micah 6:9b: *"*Hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it."[393] It seems not to matter, either to Jea or the master, precisely what scripture is used to justify the master's brutality. The message is simply that scripture authorizes a "natural" order in which some are owners and some are obediently owned. But Jea, years later, narrates the world differently, with a keener eye for scriptural patterns. He places the master in the idolatrous position of Pharoah: "his wretched heart was hardened." Jea is not only physically bound, but spiritually enslaved as well, a bondage against which he and his fellow slaves "groan, cry, and sigh" like the Hebrew people in Egypt, and all creation in Romans 8:22.

In the early pages of the narrative, Jea repeatedly demonstrates these idolatrous misreadings of the master, as well as the physical and spiritual bondage of the enslaved. Drawing on both these themes, he states

> We were often led away with the idea that our masters were our gods; and at other times we placed our ideas on the sun, moon, and stars, looking unto them, as if they

[393] It seems to have been a saying of the time. See, for example, its usage in another memoir from a few years later. Benjamin Allen, *Memoir of the Rev. Benjamin Allen* (Philadelphia: William Stavely, 1832), 162. Accessed online at < https://books.google.com/books?id=-BhMAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>

> could save us; at length we found, to our great disappointment, that these were nothing else but the works of the Supreme Being; this caused me to wonder how my master frequently expressed that all his houses, land, cattle, servants, and every thing which he possessed was his own; not considering that it was the Lord of Hosts, who has said that the gold and the silver, the earth, and the fullness thereof, belong to him (5).

Here Jea repeats a theme found in other slave narratives of the time, but with a twist. Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (also known as John Albert) begins his narrative by describing how, as a child, he wondered about a supreme power beyond the physical realities of his world. "I had, from my infancy, a curious turn of mind….it being strongly impressed on my mind that there was some GREAT MAN of power which resided above the sun, moon, and stars."[394] However, his African kin mistook those for gods and worshipped them instead of their creator. For Gronniosaw, the pedagogy of slavery built on his nascent monotheism to educate him away from such idolatry. (Phillis Wheatley's celebrated 1773 poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" expresses a similar theme.) For Jea, however, the root cause and supreme expression of this misplaced worship is in fact slavery itself. Jea positions slavery not as one serious wrong among others, but as the capstone of a whole structure of domination that has idolatry at its core. The masters are wrong not just about their ability to own *people*, but about their sense of ownership *per se*, for "the earth, and the fullness thereof, belong to" God alone.

Jea is not taken in. He comes to see that his master is in a state of deep alienation from God. In his *Life* that certainty comes not initially through the words of scripture, but Jea's reading of the created order. He sees with his own eyes that the master is not in charge of the things he claims as his own and thus that God is the only true master. "From the following instances of the

---

[394] James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (Bath, 1772), 1. Accessed at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/gronniosaw/gronnios.html>

judgements of God, I was taught that he is God, and there is none besides him" (5). The master would variously seek to "increase the produce of his lands" by planting more, or pruning differently, or storing his crops in larger barn, but in each case he suffered from his inability to safeguard his produce. "The Almighty caused the worms to eat it at the root" and destroyed a crop planted too ambitiously, or "sent the caterpillar" upon the orchard just pruned, or ordained a "dreadful storm of thunder and lightning" to destroy a barn brimming with grain (5-6). Jea's account not only evokes Jesus' parables about pride and judgement (especially the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16-2) but also the plagues that fell on Egypt before the Exodus. Renewing the exodus in late eighteenth-century New York, Oliver and Angelica Triebuen experience tribulation for their enslavement, but their hearts are continually hardened. They fail to hear the rhythms of created life because of their own cacophonous idolatry. To his master's anthropocentric cosmology, Jea interposes his theocentric account. No one can own a person, or even feel proudly entitled to the fruit of a tree. God owns all.

But the adolescent Jea was not himself in a state of perfect harmony with the God from whom these rhythms of creation come. His masters' false witness alienated him from his creator. Jea's master's sons "called us black devils*;* not considering what the Scriptures saith in the Song of Solomon, 'I am black but comely [*sic*]'" (9). From all this, Jea "was led to hate those who professed themselves Christians, and to look upon them as devils.'" This led him to rage against his masters, who then punished him with beatings but also forced him to attend church services. This only generated a fury against all things Christian. "I had seen so much deception in the people that professed to know God, that I could not endure being" among Christians (10).

However, a burning curiosity about God accompanied this rage. Jea's anger paired with this new inquisitiveness, so that he resolved either to "find [God] in one more week" or, if that

failed, “take away the minister’s life” (13). He then felt himself under the judgment of God for his sins—identified here primarily as the urge to kill. “Before the week expired I was led to see that I was a sinner…and the vengeance of God…filled me with distress” (13). When he confessed his fears of damnation to his masters, they grew alarmed by his piety. Several weeks of spiritual and physical agony followed. Jea describes this period with several long biblical quotations from Daniel, Jeremiah, and the Psalms, forming the shape of his lament with their words. Here he cuts a tragic, solitary figure, cut off even from those who endure slavery with him. Not his masters only, but “my mother, sisters, and brothers, chased me sorely without a cause,” and laughed at his desire to attend church.

Finally, Jea experienced spiritual deliverance. In a vision God showed him “a fountain of water and blood, which flowed from Emmanuel’s side…and applied it unto my heart, and cleansed it from all iniquities,” an experience Jea elaborates on simply by quoting the entirety of Ezekiel 16:6-14 (17-18). This conversion came first, his manumission later. Jea was fifteen “when the Lord was pleased to remove gross darkness, superstition, and idolatry, from my heart”(18-19). God “said unto my soul ‘Let there be light, and there was light’” he remarks, figuring his conversion as participation in creation itself (19). The experience of grace filled Jea with a sense of divine sovereignty over human and natural affairs, which leads to a willingness to preach this new gospel to all. He begins to view “all the things upon the earth as coming from God” (20). He confesses to all—master and fellow slave alike—that “they must be regenerated and born again of the water and of the Spirit” and he is received with ridicule by all (25). As a result of this evangelical fervor, he was sold successively by three different masters, “all of whom spoke ill of me, and said that I should spoil the rest of the slaves by my talking and preaching” (32). He ran away from the last master to receive baptism and plead for his freedom. The

Presbyterian minister who baptized him, Peter Lowe, told his master that "according to the spiritual law of liberty, I was considered a worthy member of society" (32). Jea was even examined by some magistrates, who "told me I was free from my master, and at liberty to leave him; but my cruel master was very unwilling to part with me." What are we to make of this? The 1706 statute had explicitly severed any legal link between conversion and manumission. But Jea writes that "it was a law…of New York, that if any slave could give a satisfactory account of what he knew of the work of the Lord on his soul he was free from slavery" (39). Perhaps Jea was mistaken, or misrepresenting the law, or perhaps there was some precedent unknown to us that was operative here.[395]

Regardless, Jea was not free yet, and one final hurdle remained before that freedom could come: a transformative encounter with the "talking book." Jea recounts how his third and final master sought to convince him of the necessity of remaining a slave. "He used to tell me that there was a time to every purpose under the sun, to do all manner of work, that slaves were in duty bound to do whatever their masters commanded….He then took the Bible and showed it to me, and said that the book talked with him" (33). Entranced, Jea "took the book, and held it up to my ears, to try whether the book would talk with me or not, but it proved to be in in vain, for I could not hear it speak one word, which caused me to grieve and lament" (33). His master speaks the language of scripture, the language of God; Jea cannot. Though Jea's newfound communion with God enabled him to see the disfigurement of slavery upon creation's order, he could not yet read and speak the revelation that confirms this insight. Unlike other uses of the "talking book"

---

[395]For Graham Hodges, "Jea mistakenly believed this emancipation was the law of New York State. In reality the magistrates [whom he would encounter later] probably only validated his baptism and conversion." Hodges, *Black Itinerants of the Gospel,* 22.

trope, however, Jea does not take this theme up to showcase his ignorance and its overcoming through Western education. Rather, he takes it up to show God's power over such barriers.

Determined to hear the Bible, Jea prayed for six weeks after which he achieved literacy, of a kind. In a vision, an angel placed a Bible in Jea's hands, illuminated it, and said:

> 'Thou hast desired to read and understand this book and to speak the language of it both in English and in Dutch; I will therefore teach thee, and now read,' and then he taught me to read the first chapter of the gospel according to St. John; and when I had read the whole chapter, the angel and the book were both gone in the twinkling of an eye (35).

Jea then demonstrated his ability to the Presbyterian minister Peter Lowe by again reading the first chapter of John, but he was unable to either read other books or write. In the narrative, this description does not so much limit his literacy as certify its status as a miracle. Brought to some magistrates, he confirmed the miracle again and they decided "that it was right and just that I should have my liberty…for they were persuaded that no man could read in such a manner, unless he was taught of God" (38). His reading, he states, was for the rest of his life confined to such books as "contain the word of God." By this miracle, he read his way to emancipation, leaving his master and embarking on a life of itinerant preaching.[396] (Jea's account of miraculous literacy here is unusual but not unique; a few other ex-slaves and free Black writers would report similar phenomena in the mid 1800s.[397])

---

[396] Given the absence of laws confirming manumission of literate, baptized slaves, Ryan Hanley suggests that it is more likely that Jea escaped slavery at this point. "It is far more likely that Jea absconded. This would explain why, apparently apropos of nothing, 'it pleased God to put it into [Jea's] mind to cross the Atlantic main' and come to Britain, where the Mansfield ruling of 1772 ensured that he could not be forcibly deported back to slavery. His decision to misinform his readership about this technically illegal escape stemmed, like the publication of his autobiography, from a desire to link evangelical Christianity with personal and spiritual freedom." Hanley's reading is plausible—certainly some explanation of Jea's emancipation is needed—though it does not explain why Jea would have initially remained in New England for several years. Hanley, *Beyond Slavery and Abolition*, 150.

[397] This phenomenon was reported also by a slave from Georgia, Bartley Hamburg Townsley, soon after 1847; George Washington Dupee, a slave owned by a Baptist minister in Kentucky soon after 1842—who also reported miraculously reading the prologue to John; and Rebecca Cox Jackson, a Shaker elder and free Black woman from Philadelphia in the

The rest of Jea's life is a blur of tragedy, further miracle, and trans-Atlantic preaching. He took on a partner in ministry, another freedman, who went with him and preached "in the fields and woods" where slaves—forbidden by New York law from gathering in large groups—could hear them (39). "We told the poor slaves that God had promised to deliver them…We encouraged them to be angry….and not to commit, sin, as the Scripture saith, Be ye angry, and sin not;" (41). Here, layers of scriptural allusions add to the sense that Jea is an apostle, replicating the experience of the church in Acts. "It pleased God to bless our feeble efforts, by adding unto our number such as should be saved," he writes, echoing Acts 2: 47 (42).

Jea might have settled in New England. Through a benefactor, Jea and his partner acquired land to build a church in New York City and held services in it, with Jea remaining there for four years. There the Spirit descended on them "like the day of Pentecost" (43). With that congregation established, Jea proceeded to Boston, and remained there for three years, preaching and building up another congregation. Upon returning to New York to see his mother and siblings, Jea married Elizabeth Jea, a Native American woman, and lived with her for two years as part of a Methodist society. But here a curious and horrific tragedy unfolded, routing Jea onto a path of itineracy. The first signs of trouble came from Elizabeth Jea's employer, who exerted pressure on her to downplay her religiosity.

> My wife's mistress had been trying to persuade her not to be so religious, for she would make herself melancholy to be so much at the house of God, and she did not

---

1850s. For more, see Duitsman Cornelius, *When I Can Read My Title Clear,* 93-94; and Callahan, *The Talking Book,* 14-16. For Jackson's firsthand account, see Rebecca Jackson, *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress,* edited by Jean McMahon Humez (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981) 107-108. In *On Christian Doctrine,* Augustine relates a similar story of an enslaved person "who, although no one had taught him to read, prayed that the skill might be revealed to him, and after three days of prayer read a book which was handed to him, to the astonishment of those who were present," preface, 4.

> like it; she told her she thought it was no harm to sing songs, and to do as the rest of the people of the world did, and said there was a time for every purpose under the sun: a time to be born, and a time to die (44).

Without explanation, Jea reports that Elizabeth Jea then began to abuse their infant daughter, especially while Jea was away. Her mother, seeking to stop her, became a target as well, until Elizabeth Jea first murdered her, and then suffocated her own infant daughter. She was executed soon after, and Jea visited her in prison frequently before her death "to convince her of the state of her soul…but her heart was so hardened by sin, that it was all in vain" (47). Understandably, Jea comments little on these extraordinarily traumatic events.

But despite this gap in the explicit narrative, this tragedy marks a dramatic shift in Jea's narrative, second in importance only to his conversion, literacy, and emancipation. This event marks the end of Jea as a New England preacher, where he would perhaps have drawn closer to the emerging institutional orbit of what would become the African Methodist Episcopal church. Instead it signals the beginning of Jea as a seafaring itinerant preacher, attached to many congregations and to none.

In the wake of this tragedy, Jea resolved to take up maritime work—financial constraints may have imposed, or the pursuit of former masters—and use it to preach. He took a job as a cook on a freight ship. There he faced the derision of sailors who mocked his inexperience and his piety. This, however, only served as the setting for another expression of divine omnipotence. A bolt of lightning during a storm killed two of the sailors who had mocked Jea, a vindication he would record in song (51).[398]

---

[398] For the song, see "God's Dominion Over the Sea" in Graham Hodges, *Black Itinerants of the Gospel,* 173.

After this vindication, he traveled on to Liverpool. He preached there for a time, then visited several English cities, preaching in "every place of worship, in the Methodist, Baptist, Calvinist, Presbyterian, and every other place, excepting the Church of England" (57). Eventually he recounts a hostile encounter from the north of England, in Sunderland. He spoke at a church there and a minister named Mr. Chittle preached before Jea and admonished the congregation for their interest in him, comparing him to Lazarus, when they should seek Jesus.

> He then began to explain who Lazarus was, and said that he was a poor man, a porter, of no reputation…He then exclaimed to the people, that they were all running after a poor dead Lazarus, and that they did not come to see Jesus; and told the people that they might as well throw their bibles and books away, as to be always running after a poor dead man, nothing but a poor wounded Lazarus…and then he closed the subject; and said, "Our friend, our black brother, will speak a few words unto you (62).

Jea responded to this provocation by embracing the analogical relation and extending it to all people. "Every sinner is as Lazarus, for we were all born in sin" he announced, preaching that Christ rose to give life to all such sinners (62). His travels continued, including return trips to New York and Boston to see his family and former congregations, during which time "I had the happiness to know that my mother and elder brother were converted, but they were afraid to apply to the magistrates for their liberty. I readily exhorted them to hold on until the end, and at last they should receive the crown that fadeth not away" (65). After remaining near New York for almost a year, he was "constrained to travel abroad again"—presumably as a way of earning income—and he traveled across the Atlantic, this time for the Netherlands, where he worked and preached in Amsterdam and Rotterdam before again returning to the United States. In Rotterdam he married a woman from Malta, Charity Jea, though she died soon after, likely in childbirth (87).

His next years continued this blur of travel, set against the backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars and fierce naval combat between the United Kingdom and France and Spain, with the United States joining the war on the side of the French in 1812. Sometimes finding work as part of these war efforts, Jea continued crisscrossing the Atlantic for several years, traveling to New Orleans, back to Liverpool, then Newberry Port, Boston, Buenos Aires—where Jea may have converted several British sailors and soldiers[399]—then back to Boston, Virginia, and Baltimore, where he was almost re-enslaved, and then back to Boston (80). Next he traveled to Ireland, where he disputed with some Calvinists over predestination and married an Irish woman named Mary Jea. During these ceaseless travels his center of gravity gradually shifted across the Atlantic to the United Kingdom.

One final trauma capped Jea's *Life*. When John and Mary Jea set sail from Ireland for Halifax—perhaps to join the Methodist Black Loyalist settlers there—French privateers captured them and imprisoned Jea from 1811 until 1815.[400] The French authorities enticed all Americans imprisoned with Jea to leave and board French ships to fight the British. He firmly refused, however, out of a generally stated commitment not to kill ("I was willing to suffer anything rather than fight or kill any one") but also an admiration for the British ("far be it from me ever to fight against Old England," 90, 89). When questioned by an American seeking to impress him into service and wondering why he would not fight for "his" country, he repudiated his American identity. "I told them that I was not an American, but that I was a poor African, a preacher of the Gospel" (90). Eventually, with the end of the Napoleonic Wars, he sailed back to England, where

---

[399] Ryan Hanley, *Beyond Slavery and Abolition,* 157.
[400] Ibid., 157.

he reunited with Mary Jea in Portsmouth. He ends his narrative there with the hymn "Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown," by Charles Wesley.

Jea's life is a ceaseless struggle to find a safe home in which he could preach the gospel. Sold into slavery in Calabar, shipped to New York and then emancipated for a life of itinerant preaching, Jea finally found that home in Portsmouth. Having mastered the languages of the empires that had enslaved him, he now settled at the very geographic heart of their maritime power. His life retraced the flows of people and power that had initially forced him across the Atlantic.

4.2.3. Jea's hymns

John Jea was a prolific hymnodist. He repeatedly called himself an "African *Preacher*," but we misunderstand him if we interpret his sermons as simply spoken and not also sung. Amid poverty he compiled a hymnal with 334 songs, 29 of which Graham Hodges judges to be Jea's own compositions.[401] As to the significance of the collection, Hodges has suggested that Jea is "among the first of the African American ministers to combine the sacred and the political in sermons and songs."[402] In addition, though his compositions fit the lyrical and thematic patterns of Wesleyan hymnody, Jea also "relied upon African musical formats for his hymns."[403]

Jea combined his various influences and themes in an invitation to the singing congregation to live into the same redeemed reality announced in scripture. The hymns Jea

---

[401] John Jea, *A Collection of Hymns, Compiled and Selected by John Jea, African Preacher* (Portsea, England: J. Williams, 1816). See Graham Hodges, *Black Itinerants,* 165-177 for an analysis and selection of the hymns authored by Jea. All hymn quotations are from these pages, cited parenthetically.
[402] Hodges, *Black Itinerants,* 166.
[403] Ibid. Following Albert Raboteau, then, we can describe Jea's singing not as a mixture, or as a kind of assimilation, but rather a continuing vitality of "African styles of worship…. not because they were preserved in a "pure" orthodoxy but because they were transformed." Raboteau, *Slave Religion,* 4.

offered indeed rang with political themes. He consistently denounced slavery as contrary to the will of God. In one of his hymns Jea contrasted the teaching of slavers with the tender kindness of God.

> When we were carried 'cross the main
> To great America,
> There we were sold, and then were told
> That we had not a soul.
>
> Thanks be to God who did in love
> To us his mercy show,
> Did to my soul his gospel show,
> By grace, almighty power. (168)

In another hymn, he displays subtle contrasts between the grasping forms of control that slave owners exert and the steadfast love of God. This contrast was on display in his narrative account of the master's agricultural practices.

> OUR master and our mistress too,
> To us they did confess,
> That we were theirs, and not our own,
> They bought us with a price.
>
> The price of silver and of gold,
> Which they did call their own,
> The sons and daughters did the same,
> As their grandfathers did.
>
> They did not think that God weIl knew
> All they did think and say
> Against us poor African slaves,
> As they do every day.
>
> But God who did poor Joseph save,
> Who was in Egypt sold,
> So did he unto us poor slaves,
> And he'll redeem the whole.

As in his narrative, here Jea portrays those who seek to own other human beings as hopelessly idolatrous. They "possess" what cannot be owned. "They bought us with a price" Jea writes,

calling to mind 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit…For you were bought with a price.” The message to those who sang with Jea would be clear: God is the only owner of persons. All claims to the contrary place the slave-owner in the position rightly occupied only by God. Indeed, even the enslavers’ more general claims to wealth and privacy are suspect. They bought slaves with gold and silver that “they did *call* their own” while in the next stanza, they slandered their slaves and “did not think that God well knew.” One day, the hymn proclaims, this system would end. The God who redeemed Joseph would “redeem the whole.”

Jea’s autobiographical hymns open his own biography up so that others could stand in his place as well. In one hymn he recounts his experiences with trouble at sea and invites listeners to imagine their own life allegorically in his. Perhaps the best example, though, is his hymn “Encouragement,” which invites white British singers to figure themselves as slaves.

> HARK! poor slave, it is the Lord,
> It is the Saviour, hear his word;
> Jesus speaks and speaks to thee,—
> “Say, poor sinner, lovest thou me?"
>
> Thou dost say "I'm not a slave,
> I was born on British ground”;
> O remember when thou wast
> In chains of sin and mis'ry bound.

In these opening stanzas and in the rest of the hymn, Jea figures sin as slavery and casts his fellow singers in the position of slaves freed by Christ, who calls them to a fitting response to his liberating love. “Lovest thou me?” One might read this as a spiritualization of slavery that evacuates the political import of Jea’s preaching, narrative, and hymnody. It is, rather, the reverse. Jea spiritualizes slavery in order to politicize salvation. Writing in England for primarily

working-class white English Methodists, Jea invites his fellow singers to figure themselves as slaves.[404] This might be an abstract metaphor, if spoken by a white minister and drawn from the language of scripture. But in the hymnal of an emancipated "African preacher," the invitation catches his listeners up in a spirit of abolition.

At their best, Jea's autobiographical hymns open his story up so that others may join him in collective, redeemed life beyond the bonds of slavery. This invitation works in the same way as his use of biblical figures. As noted in the hymn above, Joseph figured a salvation into which Jea could step and hold open for all. ("So did he unto us poor slaves/ And He'll redeem the whole.") The Bible's stories drew him into the history of redemption and allowed him to narrate his life as a sign of God's faithfulness. Jea's own life, in turn, became a place in which others could find God together in song. Others could learn the rhythms of scripture by hearing his story. His hymns, like his narrative, figure a collective salvation.

4.3 Reparative Reading and the Humanity of Scripture

When the words of life become words of death, how can they bear life again? Jea first encounters Christian scripture as a body of texts used to compel his perpetual bondage. But in his narrative, the Bible becomes a counter-script, allowing him to tell and sing the story of his life as a tale of liberation from the world of racialized slavery. To map this transformation I turn first to Jea's wounds, then to the relation between slavery and scripture, and finally to Jea's reparative reading.

---

[404] For more on Jea's calibration of his message to his British audience—and the shifting makeup of that audience, see Hanley, *Beyond Slavery and Abolition,* 144-167.

4.3.1. Jea's wounds

Many formerly enslaved people found specific passages of scripture painful in the aftermath of their bondage. In *Jesus and the Disinherited,* Howard Thurman recalls reading to his grandmother as she rested. She was illiterate and had been born into slavery. Later in life she asked her grandson to read passages of the Bible to her, including

> the more devotional Psalms, some of Isaiah, the Gospels again and again. But the Pauline epistles, never—except, at long intervals, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. …What she told me I shall never forget. 'During the days of slavery,' she said, 'the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves…Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters….as unto Christ.' Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.[405]

Thurman's grandmother did not turn away from scripture as a source of comfort and guidance. Nonetheless, parts of its testimony sparked pain. For her, the heart of that pain was the *Haustafeln,* the household codes of the New Testament, found in the Pauline epistles, that describe the appropriate virtues conforming to the relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves (see Ephesians 5:22-6:9; Colossians 3:18-4:1; Titus 2:1-10; 1 Peter 2:13-3:7; and 1 Timothy 6:1-2).[406] Thurman's grandmother had no wish to hear these passages that, on the lips of the planter class and its ministers, had done so much to justify her enslavement.

---

[405] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited,* 19-20.
[406] For more on the *Haustafeln,* see Clarice J. Martin, "The *Haustafeln* (Household Codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation: 'Free Slaves' and 'Subordinate Women'" in ed., Cain Hope Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation,* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 206-231.

Though Jea records no parallel reticence about specific passages later in life, his narrative describes several scriptures that might have provoked similar pain. Throughout his narrative Jea carefully describes the scriptural citations of his opponents in order to contextualize their errors. He follows up each citation with his own counter-citation, showing how his oppressors twisted the true meaning of the Bible as a whole. Recall the example above where Jea's master punished his slaves and then "obliged us to thank him for the punishment he had been inflicting on us, quoting that Scripture which saith, 'Bless the rod, and him that hath appointed it.' (4)." This, as I noted above, is not an exact scriptural quotation, though it is loosely based on Micah 6:9. Jea does not pause to note anything about the citation but proceeds directly to oppose it with one of his own: "But, though he was a professor of religion, he forgot that passage which saith 'God is love, and whoso dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.' And, again, we are commanded to love our enemies; but it appeared evident that his wretched heart was hardened" (4). His next master's scriptural injunctions appear to be an amalgamation of texts: "my master strove to baffle me, and to prevent me from understanding the Scriptures: so he used to tell me that there was a time to every purpose under the sun, to do all manner of work, that slaves were in duty bound to do whatever their masters commanded them" (33). It is possible to tease out specific references here, as with the citation of Micah 6:9. This enslaver clearly offered a truncated version of Ecclesiastes 3:1 ("For every thing there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven") but merely as a rubber stamp for existing social relations. So too, with the refrain about slave obedience, presumably a reference to the *Haustafeln*.

The moral difficulty attending Jea's life with scripture was not so much negotiating the pain of particular texts, but rather grasping the power to narrate the whole of scripture. Scripture, as a constellation of texts, could authorize liberation or slavery. Jea's difficulty was

hermeneutical to be sure, but it was not as much a matter of debating and dwelling on the weight of specific passages. His challenge was scriptural literacy in the broadest sense of the term: encountering and wielding the overall authorizing force of the Bible.

Jea does not record anger or pain at specific passages, but he does record anger when faced with a Christianity that consigns him to subordination, and he does record grief when he comes face to face with a text that will not speak with him. Early in his narrative Jea describes being overcome with rage at all things Christian. "From…the conduct and conversation of my master and his sons, I was led to hate those who professed themselves Christians….my fury was more particularly kindled against the minister, and I should have killed him, had I not feared the people" (9-10). He describes himself as consumed with this fury for a long time, then shame, and finally a sense of repentance that precedes his conversion experience. His anger flows toward the whole edifice of Christianity, which speaks a death-dealing word to him.

This anger becomes pain when, after his conversion, Jea is faced with scriptures that will not commune with him. When Jea seeks his liberty, his master compels him to remain a slave, citing scripture. "He then took the bible and showed it to me, and said that the book talked with him" (33). The master, and not Jea, makes the talking book speak. So he began "to grieve and lament, that after God had done so much for me….the book would not talk with me" (33-4). He prayed earnestly, he says, to "be able to *speak* it in the Dutch and English languages, that I might convince my master that he and his sons had not spoken to me as they ought" (33, emphasis mine). In the *Life* thus far, Jea does not lack the capacity to hear God, he lacks the capacity to speak the truths of scripture in a way that his master will hear and acknowledge. He faces scripture as a weapon; he longs to be addressed by it and so to be able to speak for it, but for a time he is only wounded by it.

Scripture wounds Jea, as it were, through the way it is embedded in the practices that enslave him. What "grieves" Jea, most fundamentally, is not the use of certain passages in scripture—the curse of Ham, the *Haustafeln*, Paul's counsel to Onesimus, Ecclesiastes—so much as the physical and rhetorical presence of the Bible as an object of power inaccessible to him. What wounds Jea is not so much *what* the Bible says as *who* is able to touch it, read it, preach it. All the difficulties of scripture with respect to slavery may be overcome if he can only speak with and for scripture.

4.3.2. Scripture's wounds

Although Jea overcomes them, the scriptural difficulties regarding slavery are significant. Jea's inability to speak with and for the text is an absence mirrored within the narratives of scripture itself. Take the absence of the voice of Onesimus as either speaker or addressee in the book of Philemon, an epistle the apostle Paul wrote to a slave-owner, urging him to take in his runaway slave, Onesimus. As the biblical scholar Matthew Johnson puts it, "the occluded voice of Onesimus is the wound in the text of Philemon."[407] Or consider the absence noticed by Ashleigh Elser in the narrative of Hagar and Ishmael. In Genesis 21:16-17, after her water and food ran out, Hagar "lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy…" Here, as Elser puts it, "an attentive reader pauses. There was no prior mention of Ishmael's tears."[408] The slave woman cries; God hears the voice of Abraham's son.

---

[407] Matthew Johnson, "Onesimus Speaks : Diagnosing the Hys/Terror of the Text" in *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon* edited by Matthew Johnson, James Noel, and Demetrius Williams (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 100.
[408] Ashleigh Elser, "Luther's Tears: Hagar and the Limits of Empathy," *Studies in Christian Ethics,* forthcoming.

Faithful, creative, and sensitive readers can find ways of reading these gaps redemptively—as Jea demonstrates. After they were sites of harm, stumbling blocks such as these may become sites of grace. But they are wounds all the same. Taken as a whole they amount to this: slavery is stitched through the Bible. Not as an essential part of its narrative, but as a persistent and unextirpated feature of the world in which it was written. This may seem a pedestrian observation, but it cuts to the core of both Jea's wounds and the proslavery polemic that justified his enslavement. I turn now briefly to that polemic.

Much of the contemporary discussion of nineteenth century proslavery polemic centers on the development of detailed racial accounts of human origins and their relation to the "curse of Ham." However, I focus here on a crucial point that such an emphasis can miss. Specific discourses about racial hierarchies and their connection to the Bible's authorizing force rested on an assumed approval of slavery as an institution. The purpose of those discourses about "the curse of Ham" was not to justify slavery as such, but to adjudicate the question of who would be enslaved. For the more fundamental question of the moral legitimacy of the institution of slavery per se, polemicists relied on the routine, almost atmospheric quality of slavery in scripture. This was because the basic thrust of abolitionist argument was the claim that slavery as such was sinful. The fundamental issue for both sides, then, was the question of how to understand slavery in relation to the social systems envisioned by the Bible.

For the proslavery apologists this often meant relying on slavery's biblical ubiquity and the absence of universal condemnation. If slavery was so wrong, would God not have abolished it unequivocally in the Bible? Thornton Stringfellow, author of one of the foremost Christian polemics for slavery in the antebellum American South, relied above all else on slavery's

unquestioned presence in the world of the Bible. The patriarchs, Israel, and the early church were all constituted in part by slaveholders, he argues. For,

> when God entered into covenant with Abraham, it was with him as a slaveholder; that when he took his posterity by the hand in Egypt, five hundred years afterward to confirm the promise made to Abraham, it was done with them as slaveholders… and that he did not for the fifteen hundred years of their national existence, express disapprobation toward the institution…We have also shown from the New Testament, that all the churches are recognized as composed of masters and servants and that they are instructed by Christ how to discharge their relative duties.[409]

Given the lack of unequivocal scriptural refutation, Stringfellow asks, "can any man in his proper senses….conclude that slavery is *abolished by Jesus Christ?"*[410] Another polemicist, Charles Hodge, elaborated. If slavery was as bad as abolitionists made it out to be, how then did the apostles treat it? "Not by the denunciation of slaveholding as necessarily and universally sinful…[and] not by insisting on immediate emancipation" but rather by teaching principles of love and "leaving these principles to produce their legitimate effects in ameliorating the condition of all classes of society."[411] Christianity, they argued, leaves human institutions in place but humanizes them with the love of Christ. Contemporary Christians vigorously counter that the narrative thrust of scripture points toward the abolition of slavery. Still, Thornton's descriptive point is correct: slavery is a persistent, if ambiguous, feature of the biblical landscape.

For Stringfellow, the divinely ordained status of slavery as a feature of just social relations continued to be evident through the workings of providence. Casting a contemptuous eye over the states of Latin America that had abolished slavery by 1860, Stringfellow avers that

---

[409] Thornton Stringfellow, "The Bible Argument: Or, Slavery in the Light of Divine Revelation," in *Cotton is King and Proslavery Arguments* ed. E.N. Elliott (Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbott, and Loomis, 1860), 490.
[410] Stringfellow, "The Bible Argument," in *Cotton is King*, 484. Emphasis original.
[411] Charles Hodge, "The Bible Argument on Slavery," in *Cotton is King and Proslavery Arguments* ed. E.N. Elliott (Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbott, and Loomis, 1860), 847.

"all of those States which excluded slavery have been visited in rapid succession with insurrection, revolution, and fearful anarchy…Is not this fact, like all those examined, *God's providential voice?* And does He not, in these facts, speak a language that we can *read and understand?*"[412] For Stringfellow—as for so many Christians before him—slavery was simply part of the social fabric of created human order. Like Jea, and against him, Stringfellow read the patterns of scripture in the world around him.

Insofar as they developed positive accounts of this social order—beyond arguments based on the absence of biblical condemnation—proslavery apologists often relied on texts like the *Haustafeln.* For Charles Hodge, "the obedience which slaves owe their masters, children their parents, wives their husbands, people their rulers, is always made to rest on the divine will as its ultimate foundation. It is part of the service which we owe to God."[413] Here divine sanction and "natural" social order are one. "Any violation of the precepts of the bible, on these points, is found to be a violation of the laws of nature."[414]

The jurists of the American South wove this approach into the legal fabric of their society. This desire to render slavery a brute, unalterable fact of social life is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the 1830 ruling of the Supreme Court of North Carolina in *State v. Mann*, which found that slave owners and overseers had absolute power over the bodies of their slaves. In the ruling, slavery loses any cultural or legal context and becomes an absolute fact of divinely appointed nature to which no modification is possible. For Thomas Ruffin, the Chief Justice, "the power of the master must be absolute, to render the submission of the slave perfect" for

---

[412] Stringfellow, "The Bible Argument," in *Cotton is King,* 546. Emphasis original.
[413] Charles Hodge, "The Fugitive Slave Law," in *Cotton is King and Proslavery Arguments* ed. E.N. Elliott (Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbott, and Loomis, 1860), 819.Quoted in Clarice J. Martin, "The *Haustafeln* (Household Codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation" in *Stony the Road We Trod,* 213.
[414] Charles Hodge, "The Fugitive Slave Law," in *Cotton is King and Proslavery Arguments,* 820.

"obedience is the consequence only of uncontrolled authority over the body."[415] Ruffin does not explicitly cite the *Haustafeln* of the New Testament, though he does suggest that "the slave, to remain a slave, must be made sensible, that there is no appeal from his master; that his power is in no instance usurped; but is conferred by the laws of man at least, if not by the law of God."[416] Slavery is not a socially regulated institution here, it is an ordained social reality rooted in divine order. Phrases like "perfect submission" suggest strongly that an appropriation of New Testament teachings on slavery were in view.

In all these writings and rulings, Israelite slavery and Paul's teachings became the authorization of racialized chattel slavery—an institution of which the Bible is wholly unaware. This was a corrupted enactment of scripture in reasoned legal opinions, in slave catechisms, and in the overseer's whip. Here, a twisted word became tortured flesh.

This was a horrific misuse. It was an exegetical sin the effects of which still fester, generations later. And yet, it was possible to do this with the Bible. It was possible to build an edifice of legal and social practice enshrining racialized bondage on the texts of scripture. Contemporary accounts of slavery and the Bible tend to move on quickly from the assertion that proslavery polemics misused the Bible, but this judgment is too easy, too quick. After all, though Stringfellow was horribly wrong, it is true that the apostles did not provide an unequivocal denunciation of slavery, and that the slaves freed in the Exodus would themselves own slaves, and that the *Haustafeln* do not counsel abolition.

Indeed, it is even worse than that. Slavery is woven into the imagery of the parables with which Christ led his disciples into a new imagination of the reign of God. There is, Jennifer

---

[415] Thomas Ruffin, *North Carolina v. John Mann*. 13 N.C. 263 (1829).
[416] Ruffin, *North Carolina v. John Mann*. 13 N.C. 263.

Glancy has argued, "no way to recount Jesus' parables…without repeating the violence against slave bodies that they iterate."[417] One of the foundations of the New Testament's Christology is the affirmation in the Philippians Christ-hymn that Jesus "took the form of a slave" and spurned equality with God.[418] At the very heart of Christian spirituality is the notion that slavery tells us something true and good about the relation between humans and God. This was a commonplace, as I noted in this chapter's first section, even for the lonely abolitionism of Gregory of Nyssa.

None of these problems are irresolvable. None of these necessitate a rejection of scripture. But the availability of various interpretive solutions does not mean that the biblical centrality of slavery is trivial. The centrality of slavery in scripture is a perennial stumbling block, one that requires wisdom to navigate well.[419] That is to say, the problem is ethical and biographical. How can Christians live well with these metaphors? And how may we do so in light not only of their ancient contexts, but their modern appropriations?

If enslaved Christians were wounded by the contents of scripture as well as its use, it was above all by the sense of abiding ordinariness in its depictions of bondage. This is what Jea struggled against, more than the weight of any single passage. When Jea was "grieved" to find that the talking book would not talk to him, what we must imagine is his realization that the Bible was joined with the world that enslaved him, and that he could not yet articulate a divorce between the two. This marriage between scripture and the racialized world of chattel slavery wounded not just Jea's body but also his soul.

---

[417] Jennifer Glancy, *Slavery In Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 128.
[418] For Sheila Briggs' reflections on this problematic, see "Can an Enslaved God Liberate?" *Semeia* 47 (1989): 137-153.
[419] As Matthew Elia says of Augustine, "the problem cannot be simply that Augustine liberally uses slavery metaphors. In the world he inhabited, how could he not? The problem…lies in examining how these slave metaphors do their work." "Ethics in the Afterlife of Slavery: Race, Augustinian Politics, and the Problem of the Christian Master," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 38/2 (2018): 104.

Such wounding is possible because the Bible is the word of God in human words. Thomas Aquinas' account of scripture's power of signification clarifies how scripture's words and figures may both harm and also enable spiritual transformation. He writes that in scripture God exercises the power to "signify his meaning, not by words only (as man also can do), but also by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property that the things signified by the words themselves also have a signification."[420] In scripture we learn of mundane and sordid histories. But by the Spirit, even these people, objects, and events signified by scripture's words point beyond themselves to God.

In short, scripture takes up the world as it is, that it may signify another. Scripture comes to its readers in the language they have. This is a grace, for how otherwise could we hear it? But in the Bible, these human concepts signified by human words are not a closed system. They do not refer only to histories of power and domination. These concepts are themselves made to fit a pattern of transformation so that readers take on the likeness not of Caesar and his slaves, but Christ and his friends.

Consider the assertion that Jesus is "Lord" (*kyrios*). What had been a reference to Roman patriarchal and governmental authority is taken up in the New Testament and applied to one who died the death of an outcast and a slave. Calling Jesus "Lord" did not necessarily underwrite imperial authority or give it divine sanction—though such twisted enactments would always be possible, especially after Constantine. Rather, in Christ human notions of dominion and mastery are relativized and resituated, if not abolished. Even more drastically, consider the Gospels' use of the language of fatherhood. Jesus instructs his followers to "call no one father on earth, for you

---

[420] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* I.1.10.

have one father—the one in heaven." (Matthew 23:9). Calling God "Father," therefore, cannot be a simple affirmation of existing patriarchal social structures—though again, such twisted enactments are always possible. In scripture, the Spirit takes up these human forms to signify transformation.

To put it another way, analogy does not leave the analogue unchanged. What is likened to God is not thereby reified as it is. First, this is because of the distance inherent in such analogies. If there is an analogical relation between the church's submission to Christ and the submission of slaves to their masters, "there cannot," as the 4th Lateran Council puts it, "be a likeness so great that the unlikeness is not greater."[421] Christians depend on analogy but must remember its limits. Second and more importantly, as these human concepts are taken up to signify human and divine relations, they are changed—perhaps transformed, perhaps abolished. Scripture demonstrates such transformation above all by the way these images mix with one another in the life of Christ. In his farewell discourses in John, for example, Christ shows that if slavery can be one metaphor for Christian submission to one another and God, it is a temporary rhetorical tool: the goal is friendship. "I do not call you slaves any longer…but I have called you friends" (John 15:15). Two chapters earlier, Christ washes his disciples' feet, enacting a mutuality that characterizes not only true Christian fellowship, but the relations between the persons of the trinity. In that moment in the upper room, as Herbert McCabe puts it, "Jesus proposes a new kind of hospitality, one in which the host is also slave and, therefore, not lord; in which the slave is also host and therefore not subservient. Here is something that is neither lordship nor servitude. Here is the meal of

[421] Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, Canon 2. Translated by H. J. Schroeder in *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation and Commentary*, (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1937, 241.

equals."[422] Analogy holds, and scriptural language holds, not because its reference to human realities provide a direct blueprint for the nature of God, or even of redeemed human social relations, but because such language provides a pathway toward transformation. Christ invites participation in and through the scriptures. As Jean-Louis Chrétien puts it, paraphrasing Origen,

> What use is it to me that the Word came into the world if he doesn't come into me? And what use is it to me that the Hebrews were ransomed from servitude in Egypt if I cannot myself be freed from the Egypt of my servitude? What use is it for me to read that Jesus made paralytics walk if I remain myself, before this page, deadened and dumb, if my spirit remains motionless and does not leap with alacrity from the pallet of its prejudices?[423]

In his flesh, Christ takes up human language and *moves* with it toward liberation and redemption. As scripture takes human symbols and relations and repurposes them for reference to heavenly things, those human realities are themselves transformed—perhaps abolished, perhaps renewed, perhaps reformed. The temptation, for those in power, is always to take up scripture's use of human relations as a straightforward affirmation of existing social structures. This is a misinterpretation. But it is a predictable misinterpretation in light of what scripture is, how we receive it, and who we are.

4.3.3. Embodying the scriptures after the wounds of slavery

Jea responds to his wounds not only by providing counter-exegesis, but much more by a life of counter-enactment. One textual location from which to observe this is, oddly enough, Ecclesiastes. It surfaces twice as a biblical justification for slavery. As noted above, Jea's master cited it just before Jea's deployment of the "talking book" trope (33). Here Ecclesiastes 3

---

[422] Herbert McCabe, "Washing and Eucharist," in *God, Christ, and Us*, (London: Continuum Press, 2005), 83.
[423] Jean-Louis Chrétien presents this as a quotation from Origen in *Under the Gaze of the Bible* translated by John Marson Dunaway (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 4. He does not cite the quote and it is unclear where it originates from, although it may be a paraphrase from one of Origen's sermons on the Song of Songs. Translated by R. P. Lawson, *The Songs of Songs: Commentary and Homilies* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957), 2.4.1.

authorizes every conceivable social arrangement—an all-purpose proof text from which any lesson may be drawn by those with the power to speak it with force. But Ecclesiastes surfaces again in the disturbing episode of Jea's tragically short-lived first marriage to Elizabeth Jea.

> My wife's mistress had been trying to persuade her not to be so religious, for she would make herself melancholy to be so much at the house of God…it was no harm to sing songs, and to do as the rest of the people of the world did, and said there was a time for every purpose under the sun: a time to be born, and a time to die…Thus her mistress spoke, not thinking that…the Scriptures…must be understood by the Spirit (44-5).

Here Ecclesiastes 3 stands not so much as a support for slavery as an affirmation of worldly balance over against religious zeal. Gradually Jea's wife is led by her mistress into a state of depression and conflict, killing her own mother and then her infant. It is the outworking of profound trauma in an unimaginably difficult life. It has a profound effect on John Jea. If racialized slavery is the root of the social pathologies against which Jea strives, this incident near the beginning of his narrative—at the beginning of his freedom—is the singular experience of trauma that quite literally sets his life in motion. Before this, it seemed possible that Jea could make a home in New England. Perhaps he would have gone on to play a role in the emerging African Methodist Episcopal Church. But the loss of his wife and child uprooted this fragile future. After this profound trauma he lives an itinerant life until he finds rest in England. And invocations of Ecclesiastes are at the root of both his master's oppression and his wife's tragedy.

Jea does not quibble exegetically with these invocations. Rather, he demonstrates an alternative narration that gathers up Ecclesiastes alongside not only other scriptures, but also his own life "understood by the Spirit." Just after his conversion experience, Jea reveals that God delivered him from the "fear of death" (31). In the process of relaying this, Jea embarks on a long discourse about the futility of life, and the limits of human power, borrowing heavily from themes from Ecclesiastes. He loops back several times to its opening lines, "Vanity of vanities; all is

vanity" (28). But in his *Life,* Jea's invocation of Ecclesiastes does not affirm life as it is; it serves as a confession of the finitude of humankind and the necessity of divine deliverance. This confession gathers Jea and his audience together with those who would seek foolishly to enslave others. It gathers them—and us as readers—together as penitent subjects whom Christ will save. This discourse, rooted in the themes of Ecclesiastes, becomes a way of naming that which Christ overcomes, redeems, and transforms. During a preaching tour in England, when confronted by an attack on his character framed as a denigration of "poor Lazarus," Jea pivots in precisely the same way. The text aimed at him as an attack becomes Jea's means of articulating the fallenness he shares with this audience. This confession is the prelude to God forming them, together, as a redeemed and transformed community. "*Every sinner is as Lazarus,"* he proclaims, inviting the congregation to figure confession and rebirth together (62).

Jea's rhetorical approach calls to mind an earlier sermon by Gregory of Nyssa whose fourth homily on Ecclesiastes stands as a lonely witness against slavery among the church fathers.[424] Like Jea, Nyssa takes Ecclesiastes as a confession of fallen humanity and sees in it a declaration that enslavement is idolatry. To the narrator's announcement "I bought male and female slaves…" Nyssa retorts "For what price, tell me?...What price did you put on rationality? How many obols did you reckon the equivalent of the likeness of God?"[425] For Nyssa, slavery undermines a fundamental, natural fact: the earth and all its creatures belong to God, who is a liberating God. "If God does not enslave what is free, who is he that sets his own power above God's?"[426] As with Jea, Nyssa goes on to connect possessive greed with slavery; the same

---

[424] Gregory of Nyssa, "Homily IV on Ecclesiastes," edited and translated by Stuart George Hall and Rachel Moriarty in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993), 83.
[425] Gregory of Nyssa, "Hymn IV on Ecclesiastes," 74.
[426] Ibid.

"master" who seeks to own slaves gathers gold for himself, not realizing that he is the true owner of neither. Here, the language of human obedience and God's mastery *undermines* rather than reinforces slavery and even private property. Who speaks the words of Ecclesiastes, for Nyssa? The rich and powerful (and indeed all of humanity) speak them in penitent anguish. Rather than tacit permission to maintain the status quo, Ecclesiastes confesses a whole economic pattern of human pride. For Jea and Gregory alike, Ecclesiastes is spoken as the voice of sinful and penitent humanity, a script for a sinful self who may be saved. Scripture's humanity, sometimes a cause for stumbling, becomes an occasion for transformation.

This account of slave-owning as idolatry also calls to mind Vincent Lloyd's recent work on the tradition of Black Natural Law. For Lloyd, this is presently "a tradition in ruins," but it inspired the great Black resistance movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, from Frederick Douglass and Anna Julia Cooper to W.E.B. DuBois and Martin Luther King Jr.[427] Lloyd narrates this tradition around an apophatic anthropology, the conviction that human nature is "unrepresentable" and that "any worldly law or social norm that attempts to exhaustively describe human nature, for example in slavery, runs against natural law."[428] Human nature is complex, and that complexity is "how it images God."[429] Though he likely had little historical influence on later developments in this tradition, Jea demonstrates the deep roots that declaring slave-owning idolatrous has not only in the abolition movement, but—as Nyssa suggests—in earlier Christian tradition as well. For Jea that critique of the slave-owners' idolatry also fosters a better theology

---

[427] Vincent Lloyd, *Black Natural Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 143.
[428] Lloyd, *Black Natural Law,* xi.
[429] Ibid., 7.

of creation. The signs of the natural world cohere, for the one who reads by the Spirit, with a properly theocentric cosmology.

Jea's model of reparative reading in the wake of scriptural harms, then, is to reframe difficult passages as confessions set within a larger story of salvation and liberation that invite both him and his readers into participation. What makes his approach distinct is the depth with which he then weaves these refashioned narratives into the story of his own life as well, and the way in which he holds this scriptural autobiography open as something into which others may step. For Jea, the patterns of scripture, seen rightly, set the model of a redeemed life. In his *Life,* Jea confesses like penitent Israel, leaves bondage like Joseph, preaches like Paul, returns from the sea like Jonah, figures resurrection from sin like Lazarus, and remains steadfast in prison like Peter. His *Life* self-consciously draws out all these parallels, and in so doing he claims his full humanity against those who denied it. His own life, redeemed from slavery, invites others into a similar transformation. His hymns invite the working classes of Portsmouth to see themselves as slaves, or to trace the newness of the early church in his own ministry, and so find that they too may feel the breath of the Spirit. For Jea, reading scripture well requires seeing its patterns in one's own life. What Aquinas wrote of scripture's signification is true also of scripture's readers. To read scripture reparatively is to find its patterns splayed across a whole life so that even its cracks and points of pain become sites of transformation.

Finally, this attunement to scripture is attunement to the Word. In Jea's account, the angel who becomes his teacher focuses his attention on the Prologue of John. This should serve as guide to the character of Jea's deep scriptural literacy. "The Word became flesh" in Jea's life, as he conformed the pattern of his biography to the rhythms of scripture. Literacy, in its literal sense, is a technique of pattern recognition and reproduction. In the deepest Christian sense of the word,

however, to be deeply literate is to find oneself caught up by the Word of God who speaks all things into being. It is to become a *logos* within the *Logos,* as my first chapter's description of Maximus the Confessor suggested.

Jea's deep literacy then, however one might define its literal scope, is not an approximation of a deeper thing, it is rather a demonstration of that at which all Christian literacy aims. As Peter Candler has put it, "to read the world rightly is to read it in Christ."[430] To read self, world, and scripture rightly is to be conformed to Christ. In doing so, one's life becomes a sign pointing to Christ, just as the signs of scripture and world refer—however imperfectly—back to him. Jea's narrative demonstrates such literacy.

4.4 Freedom's Limits

In 1849, Frederick Douglass had challenged abolitionists to "*give the slave himself, as the only condition upon which he could really own a Bible."*[431] For a slave to receive the Bible through the mechanisms of slavery could not help but distort scripture. With Douglass' assertion in mind, we might ask about the limits of Jea's freedom. Is Jea entirely free? For what and for whom? In this final section I engage questions about the extent of Jea's liberation and his possible malformation through concerns raised by Frantz Fanon, Willie Jennings, and others. These engagements sketch the limits and possibilities of Jea's freedom.

As I do so, however, the warnings of Saidiya Hartman echo in my mind. It is, "obscene," Hartman argues, to attempt to find a moral or a lesson, positive or negative, in stories like

---

[430] Peter Candler, *Theology Rhetoric, Manuduction, or Reading Scripture Together on the Path to God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 2.
[431] Frederick Douglass, "Rev. Henry H. Garnet," *The North Star,* August 17, 1849, page 2. Emphasis original

Jea's.[432] "Every attempt to emplot the slave in a narrative ultimately result[s] in his or her obliteration."[433] Hartman has her sights squarely on cheerful readings of slave narratives, arguing that they reproduce violence against the enslaved person, "requiring" as it does, "that her life be made useful or instructive, by finding in it a lesson for our future or a hope for history."[434] But her criticism applies as well to pessimistic readings which as we will see below measure Jea's narrative by a standard to which he had no interest in conforming.

Hartman's challenge is less a constructive approach to such narratives as it is a set of questions that haunt all approaches. "How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of the violence? Is the 'terrible beauty' that resides in such a scene something akin to remedy?"[435] Hartman forces us to wonder about the purpose of such remembering. Stories like Jea's come to us from the heart of the violence that made the modern world. There is no comforting triumph in his biography. Can telling such stories "in dark times," help us find "a way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe?"[436] With Hartman, we should be uneasy as we seek such help—uneasy with ourselves. If there is hope in Jea's biography, as I contend, it is not because his own life represents a triumph of itself, but because he forms his story in such a way as to point beyond himself in invitation. His narrative, his songs, and his ministry at the end of his life present us with a picture of witness in communion that, if it cannot escape the workings of racial capitalism entirely, still refuses to be defined by it. And yet

---

[432] Frank B. Wilderson III and Saidiya V. Hartman, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13.2 (2003), 185.
[433] Saidiya V. Hartman, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle,* 184.
[434] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (2008), 14.
[435] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe,* 14.
[436] Ibid., 14, 3.

as we remember Jea and others like him, we must always ask why we do so. For whom is this hope intended? "For us or for them?"[437]

4.4.1 Jea as lonely imitator

I turn first to psychiatrist and postcolonial political philosopher Frantz Fanon to sketch the problem. In *Black Skin, White Masks,* Fanon reflects on a vicious circle that entraps colonized Black subjects. Near the end of the book he alights on this startling conclusion: "For the black man, there is but one destiny. And it is white."[438] Though easily misunderstood, this thesis captures the dilemma. The colonized Black subject, for Fanon, might seek advancement through an embrace of the culture of the white colonizer. Recognition comes here by taking on the language, the habits of life, and the ideology of the oppressor. "The more the black Antillean assimilates the French language, the whiter he gets—i.e., the closer he comes to becoming a true human."[439] Acceptance, Fanon argues, requires assimilation and loss of identity. But such recognition is asymptotic. For Fanon—autobiographically and as a description of colonized experience in general—every achievement of the colonized subject is framed in terms of the prior achievements and capacities of European accomplishment. If the destiny of the Black Antillean is "white," Fanon submits that this destiny is always in the future, never achieved.

Black essentialism might be an alternative to this endless imitation, but for Fanon it is just as hopeless. Such an approach only reinscribes a never-ending comparison between static conceptions of identity, always overshadowed by the oppressor. If a distinct Black identity might be championed, it cannot escape being framed in or against the terms of "white civilization."

---

[437] Ibid., 3.
[438] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 202.
[439] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* 2.

"The black man is *comparaison*" he concludes, in the sense that, "he is always dependent on the presence of the 'Other.'"[440] Summarizing these two options of Black essentialism and white assimilation, Fanon describes his own experience as a Black man from Martinique. "I wanted to be typically black—that was out of the question. I wanted to be white—that was a joke."[441] "And so, "every hand was for me a losing hand."[442] Colonialism entraps the colonized. For Fanon, neither assimilation nor oppositional essentialism provide a way out. The only path forward, for him, is a steadfast humanism of anticolonial struggle. The status of humanity is not received from a pure mythical past or the culture of the oppressor. The human, for Fanon, is formed in the struggle against colonialism—a struggle all may join.[443]

Fanon's analysis lays bare the difficulties Jea faced, both psychologically and rhetorically in his narrative. Jea is faced with achieving emancipation through a religion, a set of languages, and holy texts, that all in one way or another are used to justify and extend his subjugation. This raises the question of whether his conversion is in fact an extension of his colonization, this time of his consciousness and not just his body. When Jea becomes a Christian and spends his life preaching salvation in Christ, has he simply internalized the oppression meted out first on his body? Is his baptism the completion of that first enslavement, or its undoing?

If his conversion was an act of internalized colonization, then his acquisition of literacy is no act of liberation, but rather a weak imitation of the white literacy that functions as part of the

---

[440] Ibid., 185-6.
[441] Ibid., 111.
[442] This comes from an earlier translation. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markman (New York, Grove Press, 1967), 132.
[443]Of his identity he concludes, at one point, simply that "I find myself one day in the world, and I acknowledge one right for myself: the right to demand human behavior from the other." Ibid., 204. If any narrative of emancipation fits Fanon's mold, it is Frederick Douglass's, in which the key moment of self-realization is not literacy or community, but self-assertion in his fight with an overseer. "This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom and revived within me a sense of my own manhood." Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York, Barnes & Noble Classics, 1845, 2003), 69.

apparatus that contained and dominated him in the first place. This, at least, is the dismal conclusion of Henry Louis Gates Jr. For Gates, John Jea's narrative falls into the first trap Fanon identifies. It is finally an imitation of white literacy. Gates bases his conclusion on the ambiguous status of Jea's literacy. At the end of his *Life,* Jea apologizes for potential errors in his work

> I have stated this in the best manner I am able, for I cannot write, therefore it is not quite so correct as if I had been able to have written it myself; not being able to notice the time and date when I left several places, in my travels from time to time, as many do when they are travelling; nor would I allow alterations to be made by the person whom I employed to print this Narrative (95).

Despite the claim of his subtitle ("Compiled and Written by Himself") Jea acknowledges that the work has been dictated. We have no evidence that Jea reads anything other than the Bible—and his only explicit accounts of reading are of the first chapter of the Gospel of John—though the *Life* quotes extensively from a great breadth of scripture. Gates assumes that this means Jea's capacity for literacy is in fact only a capacity for memorization, and he reads this limited capacity as a metaphor for Jea's freedom. For Gates, Jea's literacy is "a canceled presence, because he can only read one chapter of one book….Jea can only make the text speak, as it were, by memorization, rather than by the true mastery of its letters. His is the oral reading and writing of memory, of the sort practiced by the Yoruba *babawalo*."[444] This is, Gates concludes, "at best an ironic mode of reading" that stands somewhere between "the illiterate slave and the fully literate European."[445]

The precise status of Jea's literacy may not seem important. Indeed, I will argue that it is not. But for Gates and other scholars of the African-American literary tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is a question of unavoidable importance, for these autobiographies

---

[444] Gates, *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic,* 28. That is, oral storytellers.
[445] Ibid.

signify freedom. For William Andrews, the development of the genre of slave autobiography in the nineteenth century was a story of increasing control over the medium of novel-like autobiography. The narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, for example, contained no lengthy scriptural quotations or hymns, or other digressions—as Jea's did—but instead included verbatim dialogue that gave the stories a life-like (or rather, a novelized) character. By this achievement, Black writers like Douglass and Jacobs appropriated the medium of the novelized biography "for purposes of signification outside that which was privileged by the dominant culture."[446] But first, "the journey of black autobiography toward *free telling* had to pass through the intervening consciousness of amanuenses and editors."[447] That is to say, Jea's *Life* represents an intermediate stage, a partial achievement that stands overshadowed by its more novelized successors. But why should this be so? Why is a novelized biography *freer* than a sermonic and sung testimony? Here in Gates and Andrews, we see not only the trap into which Jea may fall—per Fanon's analysis—but also the trap into which commentators may stumble as well. Is Jea's narrative evidence of unfreedom simply because it fails to measure up to the conventions of a genre in which he never sought to participate? It is true that Jea fails to produce an account that conforms to liberal notions of freedom from constraint demonstrated by written, individualized biography; instead, his *Life* echoes a choral and collective liberation. For Gates, this signifies the persistence of Jea's bondage. For me, it signifies his freedom.

However, criticism from Willie Jennings suggests a more serious problem with Jea's freedom. In *The Christian Imagination* Jennings provides an account of the damage wrought by colonialism on the relation between peoples and the land in Christian contexts. One of his several

---

[446] Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 290.
[447] Ibid. Emphasis mine.

illustrative case studies is Olaudah Equiano. For Jennings, Equiano demonstrates the limits and possibilities of a "Christianity born of the colonialist wound."[448] Equiano finds in his conversion to Christianity the possibility of a boundless intimacy with God, which grounds his own emancipation and life as a British abolitionist. "His connection to God would not be…thwarted" by the fetid intimacy between Western Christianity and slavery.[449] But if it was not thwarted, Equiano still bore the wounds that intimacy inflicted.

Equiano's Christianity was lonely. Ripped away from his African kin—especially his sister—Jennings narrates how Equiano attempted to find community among the new society in which his words had earned him a place. His "Christian faith sought belonging but was repeatedly thrown back by the dominant racial calculus to a theological isolationism in which God's providential care had to substitute for communal care."[450] Equiano's baptism had little material consequence for his relation to white people and their society. "He inherited a vision of salvation evacuated of material consequences," Jennings writes. His achievements, literary and biographical, were remarkable but they "obtained inside a great tragedy; he was saved, but to whom was he saved?"[451] Equiano "entered a Christianity constituted without belonging."[452]

For Jennings this loss is representative. "Black Atlantic Christianity has been marked by this absence," the "aching absence of a truly Christian intellectual community at the heart of

---

[448] Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Have: Yale University Press, 2010), 291. I take the phrase slightly out of context.
[449] Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 183.
[450] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 183.
[451] Ibid., 194.
[452] Ibid., 198.

church life."[453] Of the conditions of Black Christianity during slavery—necessarily secretive, denied the possibility of public fellowship—Jennings writes the following:

> When slaves sought biblical literacy, in that too they were forced to enact strategies of assembly (*ekklesia*) that bound the ways they imagined their freedom (if not also their survival) to reading alone and apart. Here was a compromise of epic significance, a young (black) church forced to read alone in fear of violence and death.[454]

"Forced to read alone" is a phrase that summarizes much of Jea's narrative. God's providential care set him free, but like Equiano, he found or at least reports very little human intimacy beyond that. To repeat the beautifully phrased question Jennings asks of Equiano: Jea was saved, but to whom was he saved? Perhaps not his family, whom he reports visiting in later life, but whom he also describes at one point as "foes" (24).[455] Perhaps not his first wife, whose tragic struggles he could only understand within the frame of an individual fight against sin. These absences were the "hidden costs of his literacy."[456]

If Jea exemplifies reparative reading, he also demonstrates one way in which such reading can go wrong. Jea is liberated from slavery by a Spirit-breathed reading of scripture. But this new life of scriptural literacy is limited by its lack of community. To be sure, this is not to be laid at the feet of Jea. He did not compel the suffering that afflicted him and sent him, time and again, across the Atlantic. What we may observe, however, is the lonely shape of his narrative. He was saved, but to whom?

---

[453] Ibid., 202.
[454] Ibid., 240.
[455] As John Saillant puts it, rather too strongly, "Jea might well seem to be a parody of self-absorption," for whom literacy itself was a "purely internal state…not cultivated in time in a community of readers and learners" and who depicted himself with a kind of "disconnection from tradition, absence of communal ties." John Saillant, "Traveling in Old and New Worlds with John Jea, the African Preacher, 1773-1816," *Journal of American Studies*, 33/3 (1999): 473-490. 488, 485.
[456] Jennings, *The Christianity Imagination,* 208.

4.4.2 Jea as inviting singer

This question calls to mind the losses and absences in Jea's *Life*: his dead wives, his dead children, and the family he left behind first in Calabar and then New York. There is a lonely heroism in Jea's *Life* that Jennings' work allows us to see and to mourn. But these observations should not prevent us from seeing this as well: amid these losses, Jea forms and finds new community. To whom was Jea saved? To his fellow singers, at least.

Focusing on Jea's hymnody allows us to see the inviting and therefore communal quality of even his heroic loneliness. Jea reads his way to freedom, often alone. But he does so singing, with a congregation that ranges across the Atlantic, from Boston to Liverpool, from New York to Rotterdam, Derry, and Portsmouth. He sings his life not so much to set himself apart, but to invite others into the freedom he has found—partial, incomplete, and burdened though it is. If Jea cuts a solitary figure, it is the figure not of the isolated writer but of the song leader standing alone at the head of the congregation.

James Cone's writings on the spirituals give us a picture of the communal joy inherent in the songs Jea wrote and sang. "The spiritual," Cone writes, "is the spirit of the people struggling to be free; it is …the community in rhythm, swinging to the movement of life."[457] What is more, such songs ought not be read as escapism or an embrace of future blessing in order to justify present acquiescence to oppression. "The black slaves were not passively waiting for the future; they were actively living as if the future were already present."[458] As I noted in my third chapter, this is what Cone calls the "transcendent present." Jea invites his listeners to join him in that present.

---

[457] James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 32-38.
[458] Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues,* 92.

Even Jea's prose text resounds with this invitation. Scripture is woven through his narrative in a pattern of call and response. Jea will typically relate some incident of horror—a master using scripture to justify slavery, or a preacher calling him a dead Lazarus—and then fold these discordant notes into his narrative like suspended chords that resolve. As the historian John Saillant summarizes, "slavery, oppression, and trauma were described in abrupt, angry prose, then countered by the cadence and diction of scripture, then, at last, as the *Life* proceeded, in the meter and rhyme of hymns. Trauma, scripture, and song was the organizing principle of *The Life.*"[459] His narrative teaches his listeners to counterpose the discordant notes of suffering with the melody of scripture. Above all, Jea counter-narrated the world with *sung* scripture, surrounding the idolatrous notes of human mastery with a far more resonant harmony.

Native American literary theorist Laura Donaldson has offered the term "retraditionalization" as a way of thinking about such appropriations of Christianity by colonized peoples. In an essay on the Native American Methodist minister William Apess, she suggests that "retraditionalization" captures the simultaneous sense in which such expressions of faith are both authentically Christian and unapologetically Indigenous (in her case), rather than emphases on "syncretism or postcolonial hybridity."[460] Jea's hymns are a form of "retraditionalization," because in them Jea asserts his Africanness and Christianity in such a way that both enhance and deepen the other. Such an approach recognizes the acquisition of literacy, Donaldson writes elsewhere, as a "double-edged mark" showing that "although we are subject to colonial history,

---

[459] John Saillant, "Make a Black Life, and Bid It Sing: Sacred Song in *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea*," *Auto/Biography Studies*, 31:1 (2016): 158.
[460] Laura Donaldson, "Making a Joyful Noise: William Apess and the Search for Postcolonial Method(ism)," *Interventions*, 7:2, 60.

we have not been totally subjected to it."[461] We will miss this complex texture of Jea's *Life,* with its mixture of persistent tragedy and enduring vitality, unless with Donaldson we refuse "the simplistically binary plot of either triumph or fall."[462]

While Willie Jennings' reading of Equiano is primarily tragic, Jennings' work as a whole resonates strongly with that of Donaldson here. Like Donaldson, Jennings had earlier criticized those who assert that "when the slaves take upon their lips the theological language of the church, they have in fact taken up the world of the slaveholders and thereby have taken up a 'worldview' foreign to their (African) being."[463] Beyond a static and "romanticized" spiritual state, Jennings reads the appropriation of Christianity by enslaved Africans as a struggle of becoming, in which Africans encountered a "wounding word" in colonial Christianity and yet persevered towards God. "In the face of a profoundly distorted Christian witness," Jennings writes, "people of African descent became authentically Christian."[464]

With this deeper sense of Jea's narrative in view, I want to return again to the question of literacy. Perhaps Jea was at best a memorizer, as Gates would have it. Perhaps he was possessed of the divinely granted ability to read only the Bible, as Jea testifies. John Saillant has also proposed that Jea may have been physically handicapped in some way by the age of forty when he wrote the narrative. In Saillant's scenario Jea was cognitively literate, but unable physically to write.[465] He could thus exercise full editorial control over his manuscript.

---

[461] Laura Donaldson, "Writing the Talking Stick: Alphabetic Literacy as Colonial Technology and Postcolonial Appropriation," *American Indian Quarterly* 22/1-2 (1998): 60.
[462] Donaldson, "Writing the Talking Stick," *American Indian Quarterly,* 60.
[463] Willie James Jennings, "Wrestling With a Wounding Word: Reading the Disjointed Lines of African American Spirituality," *Modern Theology* 13:1 (January 1997): 158.
[464] Jennings, "Wrestling With a Wounding Word," 160, 154.
[465] John Saillant "Make a Black Life, and Bid It Sing," 160.

Which of these would make him free? I have argued already that Jea demonstrates a deep scriptural literacy. Theological reading, in this sense, is not so much a matter of the ability to vocalize written words, though it may benefit from it. Theological literacy concerns "the establishment of certain relations between readers and the things they read," as Paul Griffiths has argued.[466] Such readers understand the "text" they relate to as a "stable and vastly rich resource….a treasure house, an ocean, a mine…what is there to be read always precedes, exceeds, and in the end supersedes its readers."[467] But this means that readers "paradoxically, need not know how to read."[468] Jea's literal capacity to write and read in English and Dutch is not an important issue (except perhaps as a means of certifying or falsifying his claim to a miracle).

Augustine's comments on signs in *On Christian Doctrine* reinforce this point and, one last time, underline once more the centrality of slavery as a metaphor in Christian thought. For Augustine, knowing that a sign in scripture refers not to itself but to a greater spiritual reality is a kind of freedom. Readings signs well constitutes true literacy and true freedom. Conversely, "he is a slave to a sign who uses or worships a significant thing without knowing what it signifies."[469] This is an attitude he ascribes above all to "servitude among the Jewish people."[470] This association between literal reading, Judaism, and slavery has roots at least as old as Paul's allegorical reading of Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4, and its points us ahead to the concerns about election and supersessionism I explore in the next chapter.

---

[466] Paul Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 41
[467] Griffiths, *Religious Reading,* 41.
[468] Ibid., 40.
[469] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,* III, 9.
[470] Ibid., III, 6.

Despite the problematic history of this metaphorical association between Jews, literal reading, and slavery, Jea participates in this tradition of finding freedom in spiritual reading. For Jea, "the letter kills but the Spirit brings life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). I note this here to underline a recurring theme of this chapter: Jea finds new life in the scriptures and in the broader Christian tradition not by uncovering a pristine purity at the heart of its human witnesses. Jea finds new life in the scriptures because the Spirit rests on him and the scriptures alike and enables the scriptures to speak freedom once more, through the witness of Jea's own life. Jea can "read" in that he participates in the world of scripture and can join its resonance with the created order around him. Participating in the world of scripture ,he participates in the Word of God who sings creation into being.

4.4.3 Jea's community

While lonely, Jea's literacy is also deeply relational. One of the most profound insights echoed throughout the tradition of Black autobiographical writing during and after slavery is the assertion that domination wounds the oppressor even as it injures the oppressed. For Jea, this is most visible through the inviting quality of his story and the way he reads slave-holding as an expression of an idolatry that mars the souls of his masters. This insight becomes more explicit in later narratives by other authors. For example, in the wake of her sexual abuse at the hands of the white man who claimed to own her body, Harriet Jacobs writes in her 1861 memoir that "slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks. It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious."[471] This

[471] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston, 1861), 81. Accessed at <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html>

transformation is most effectively symbolized in Frederick Douglass' descriptions of his enslaver Sophie Auld. Before she came into possession of his body, he describes her as one of the kindest women he had met. As soon as she possessed a human being, however, "the fatal poison…was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord."[472] He concludes, "Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me."[473] Such writing might strike modern readers as rhetorical hyperbole. It is none the less genuine for its rhetorical craft. Indeed, this observation represents not only an insight into the human condition, but also a profound moral achievement by those who, like Douglass, Jacobs, and Jea, passed through the horrors of slavery.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s exploration of this same theme points us to the communion for which Jea was freed. Speaking in 1957 during the struggle against segregation, King argued that Jim Crow injured both the white oppressor and the Black oppressed. "It inflicts the segregator with a false sense of superiority, while inflicting the segregated with a false sense of inferiority."[474] King recognized that segregation wounded white oppressors because he saw it as a perversion of a more fundamental, more "natural" social reality. For King, as for the Christian tradition more broadly, loving communion is the goal of human life. If oppression and domination characterize much of human social relations, they are not at the

---

[472] Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave,* 40.
[473] Ibid., 43.
[474] Martin Luther King Jr., "The Christian Way of Life in Human Relations," *Address Delivered at the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches* (St. Louis, MO: December 4, 1957), accessed at < https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/christian-way-life-human-relations-address-delivered-general-assembly-national#fn1>

deepest level what is most true of humanity. As he argues in the same speech "the end is redemption. The end is reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness."[475] King's notion of "beloved community" has at its heart the conviction that neither the means nor the final end of the struggle for justice can be an abstract accounting of wrongs. Rather, the struggle must both consist in and aim toward life lived in restored communion, where oppressors are held steadfastly to account precisely in order that they and their victims alike might find restitution and healing.

What we overhear in Jea's *Life* is a quiet, incomplete, and anticipatory part of the melody of King's "beloved community." At the end of his life this African preacher preaches to multiracial working-class congregations. The twisted embodiments of scripture in the ideologies and material realities of racial capitalism had separated and subordinated Jea, rendering him a mute and deaf subject before the authoritative texts of scripture. And yet, by grace, the talking book spoke to him, and *he sang with it*. The Spirit opened a space for Jea to join and create new forms of community that racial capitalism sought to destroy, at the very heart of the mercantile and military system that had enslaved him.

In his congregation at the end of his life at Portsea, Jea gathers around himself a shifting collection of white and Black working-class people formed by the underside of racial capitalism. According to the historian Ryan Hanley, these would have been "constantly shifting congregations of between 70 and 100 soldiers, dockers, publicans,

---

[475] King, "The Christian Way of Life in Human Relations."

prostitutes, landladies and servers."[476] Such a congregation refused the atomization and segregation of the emerging economic and racial order I surveyed in this chapter's first section. It was, to borrow a phrase from Paul Gilroy's recommendation of Frantz Fanon, a way of imagining "a new humanism…contoured specifically by the denaturing of race and the repudiation of racial orders."[477] In his preaching and singing, Jea invited his listeners to, as Gilroy puts it, "turn firmly away from the defaulted racial ordering of life."[478] This was not akin to unaccountable attempts at "colorblindness." Jea's life was not a tacit permission for the continuation of racial hierarchies. Rather—again in Gilroy's words—his was a "reparative humanism."[479] By his song and preached word he opened a space for the white and Black poor to join around scripture as it was embodied in his own life, figuring a space for communion. His mode of witness refused racial hierarchies by inviting a multiracial working class to trace the patterns of scripture across their own lives through the witness of this "poor African preacher."

With Hartman's warnings from the beginning of this section in mind, I must be careful here not to overstate Jea's success. He could not escape the twisted intimacies of the racial colonial order entirely, nor could his congregation. He founded no transformed movement. He died poor, among the poor, on the underside of British maritime power. But if

---

[476] Hanley, *Beyond Slavery and Abolition,* 161.
[477] Paul Gilroy, "Suffering and Infrahumanity," The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Yale University, February 21, 2014. Accessed at < https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_resources/documents/a-to-z/g/Gilroy%20manuscript%20PDF.pdf> page 38.
[478] Paul Gilroy, "Never Again: Refusing Race and Salvaging the Human," Holberg Lecture, University of Bergen, Norway, June 4, 2019. Accessed at <https://www.newframe.com/long-read-refusing-race-and-salvaging-the-human/>
[479] Paul Gilroy, "Humanities and a New Humanism," The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Yale University, February 21, 2014. Accessed at < https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_resources/documents/a-to-z/g/Gilroy%20manuscript%20PDF.pdf> page 67.

we derive from this an irremediably tragic reading of Jea's *Life,* then we have failed to hear his song. Jea found beloved community fleetingly and imperfectly, but truly and freely.

That freedom is not a solution to the wounds of scripture's entanglement with slavery and colonialism. Rather, Christian freedom is the shape through which Jea struggles with those difficulties.[480] Jea does not represent the triumph of Christianity. Jea poses a question to contemporary Christianity still marked by its colonial entanglements. Will his freedom be ours? This is nowhere better expressed than in Jennings' account of the Ethiopian eunuch in his commentary on Acts 8.

> Can one who has lived at the margins of community or in its liminal spaces because of their identity live free in Christ, or will social forces constrict that freedom and strangle redemptive joy? Equally important, will we see in him our freedom in Christ, in our differences, and in the ambiguities of our existence? His journey into the unknown is our journey. He moves forward into the future of the church, and he will be for the church a question that is yet to be answered.[481]

Conclusion

After five hundred years of printed, singe-volume Bibles, many Christians have accustomed themselves to thinking of the scriptures as a standalone object encountered through reading—whether silent and individual or oral and corporate. Theologians decrying the loss of premodern modes of liturgical and figural reading have outlined the significance and cost of these

---

[480] In the words of Jennings, "I have taken Christianity to be at the heart of a definition of Afro-spirituality, but also at its heart is resistance to a totalizing comprehensive Christian definition to that spirituality. Christianity, then, in a real sense, presents 'the wrestlin,' the struggle, that is Afro-spirituality. As with the story of Jacob alluded to at the beginning of this essay, Christianity has been a wounding word, a wounding revelation for the African in the new world. This revelation has meant andmeans struggle but it has also meant and means promise. We have indeed been marked by the struggle as children of the promise." Jennings, "Wrestling With a Wounding Word," 167.
[481] Jennings, *Acts,* 75.

changes.[482] Still, even for those Protestants (myself among them) for whom the Bible is above all an object of silent and solitary piety, this is not all the Bible is, or even how it is most often encountered. When Jea encounters the Bible, he encounters it as it is woven through the world around him, in the blows of his masters, the injunctions of church ministers and slave catechisms, and as an initially mute physical object that grants power. The scriptures are embedded in Jea's world orally, physically, and socially. In this, Jea's case is representative. The scriptures are embedded in the world. They are therefore embedded also in systems of domination. The ambiguity that allows this misuse is inherent in the emergence, transmission, and use of scripture within human history. Just as Jea meets scripture embedded in worlds of slavery, so too scripture itself emerges from worlds of bondage.

Jea demonstrates the limits and possibilities of reading the scriptures amid suffering in which they are intermeshed. By the Spirit, Jea reads anew. He learns to read the world scripturally in a way that breaks free from idolatrous practices of human ownership. Whether as an extraordinary capacity for memory, or the miraculous ability to read only the word of God, or through a physically handicapped reading ability, God gifts Jea a deep and abiding scriptural literacy. This deep literacy enables him to hear himself in scripture's melodies of liberation and divine sovereignty and invite others to sing their lives to harmonious tunes. As scripture mediates God's liberating action, so too Jea's life mediated scripture to others in song, in writing, and in preaching. Jea is, in the terms of Maximus the Confessor introduced in the first chapter, a *logos* in the *Logos*, an embodied argument rooted in Christ. Through Jea's life, the Spirit joined others to Christ. In short, scripture's entanglement with human life was the condition not only for Jea's

---

[482] See Peter Candler,'s *Theology, Rhetoric, Manuduction* on the modern shift to "representational" reading from premodern "participatory" reading.

masters' twisted enactments of scripture, but also for Jea's liberating embodiment. This befits the incarnational reality of the Bible. Christians receive scripture not simply from a book, but from the shape of one another's lives.

~

John Jea's life displays the difficulty and promise of living well with scripture when it is entangled with fallen human social life. In the next chapter, the autobiographical writings of Elias Chacour will build on and intensify this difficulty. If Chacour's suffering is not greater than Jea's, the case of Palestinian Christians nonetheless reveals what is perhaps a more destabilizing existential and interpretive problem: how can Christians read scripture well when it not only seems to compel their suffering, but reads them out of the very story of salvation?

Chapter 5

Were We Not 'Children of the Promise?' Peoplehood, Election, and the Fortitude of Elias Chacour

When the Israelite conquest of Canaan was completed, or seemed to be, Joshua addressed the people. He charged them to "choose this day whom you will serve," and incited their gratitude for God's impossible gift. "I gave you a land on which you had not labored" the Lord declared, "and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruits of vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant" (Joshua 24:13). Gratuitous divine blessing formed a people in the wake of suffering.

In the final days of October 1948, the newly formed Israel Defense Forces forcibly displaced the Palestinian villagers of Sasa as part of "Operation Hiram," an effort to seize northern Galilee and prepare it for Jewish settlement within the new state of Israel.[483] IDF soldiers and new Jewish immigrants founded a kibbutz on the site soon afterward. As part of their Passover Haggadah in 1949, one of those settlers wrote and recited the following:

---

[483] For a brief overview of the struggle for Sasa, including massacres committed in the village by the IDF, see Walid Khalidi's encyclopedic *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (White Plains, Maryland: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992), 495-497. For an overview of Operation Hiram and the parallel Operation Yoav in the south, see Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 462-492. I rely heavily on Morris in this chapter for background on the events of 1948. Morris is a leading figure among the "New Historians," a group of revisionist Israeli historians who have argued, on the basis of documents declassified in the 1980s, that the IDF intentionally carried out expulsions of Palestinians in 1948—against the previous Israeli consensus that Palestinian depopulation was voluntary. Morris himself is ardently pro-Zionist. For him, the events of 1948 constituted *necessary* ethnic cleansing. Indeed, he faults David Ben-Gurion for getting "cold feet." In an interview in 2004 Morris stated "A Jewish state would not have come into being without the uprooting of 700,000 Palestinians…It was necessary to cleanse the hinterland…Even the great American democracy could not have been created without the annihilation of the Indians. There are cases in which the overall, final good justifies harsh and cruel acts that are committed in the course of history." Interview with Ari Shavit, "Survival of the Fittest," *Haaretz* September 1, 2004. <https://web.archive.org/web/20080607060238/http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=380984>

> Once there was an Arab village here.…The fields we tend today were tended by others one year ago…And when we came the desolation of their lives cried to us through the ruins they left behind.…So we search for justification for the right to be here…It isn't difficult to imagine how life must have been. Here a slipper, there a mirror, here a sack of grain, there a family portrait, a child's toy…What gives us the right to reap the fruits of trees we have not planted, to take shelter in houses we have not built?...On what moral grounds shall we stand when we take ourselves to court?[484]

For Joshua, unearned harvests elicited gratitude. For this settler, unearned harvests asked an unanswerable question. *What gives us the right to reap the fruits of trees we have not planted?* The settler's invocation of Joshua's benediction signals a hermeneutical rupture. Joshua's words do not consecrate so much as haunt. When the settler wonders *on what moral grounds shall we stand when we take ourselves to court?* there is a kind of loneliness in the words—a loneliness that comes, I think, from the realization that the book of Joshua is no longer a judge in the courtroom, but the settler's co-defendant.[485] Can the words of Joshua consecrate any longer when the *desolation of their lives cries to us through the ruins they left behind?* As a descendent of European settlers in North America, I must ask the same question.

In those early years after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War the settler quoted above might have passed a young Palestinian boy named Elias Chacour on the road. Until 1948, Chacour lived in the village of Bir'im, four kilometers northeast of Sasa. During and after the war, the

---

[484] Sasa, *A Passover Haggadah,* 29-31. Quoted in Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *Original Sins: Reflections on the History of Zionism and Israel* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), 161. Also quoted in Noga Kadman, *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Israel and the Depopulated Palestinian Villages of 1948* translated by Dimi Reider, (Bloomington, IL, Indiana University Press, 2015), 84. I am grateful to Bruce Fisk for drawing my attention to this quote.

[485] However, this quote should not be taken as representative of the sentiments of first-generation Israeli settlers. For a broader analysis, see Noga Kadman's *Erased from Space and Consciousness.* She concludes, "the members of these communities voice acceptance of and live in peace with the act of settlement in a village whose residents were dispossessed and turned into refugees. Usually they see the villages simply as abandoned, ruined places they need to restore and rebuild, using the remains left in place. The Jewish residents tend to ignore the reasons for the destruction of the village and the absence of its original inhabitants, as well as the latter's subsequent fate. The few who acknowledge the fact of dispossession see it at best as an undesirable, yet inevitable result of a national conflict and war." 89.

IDF forced all the residents of Bir'im to leave their homes, destroyed the village, and then settled some of them in Jish, itself a depopulated town just southeast of Sasa.[486] Years later Chacour finally visited the ruins of Bir'im. Like Sasa, it had become the site of a new kibbutz, as well as a national park dedicated to the ruins of an ancient synagogue. There, quoting Romans 9:8, he asked a question that complements, from the underside, those of the Jewish settler. "Were we not 'children of the promise, regarded as Abraham's offspring?'"[487] Why could Joshua's vision not also extend to him?

If Anna Jansz demonstrated the burden and blessing of living well with scripture's promises and John Jea displayed a reparative response to scripture's entanglements with oppression, the unique aspects of Palestinian Christian experience allow the present chapter to present a more fundamental question nonetheless present in all three cases: how can you read the Bible well when its good news does not seem intended for *you*?

This is a question posed with special clarity by Palestinian Christians. Palestinian loss is measured in alienation from the land—unharvested orchards, rusty keys to demolished houses, farmland on the wrong side of the separation wall. But for Palestinian Christians, these losses may be measured, too, in alienation from the Bible, especially the Old Testament.[488] After 1948 and 1967, it was harder for Palestinian Christians to read themselves as heirs of God's promises to Israel, fulfilled in Jesus Christ. With Western Christians and religious Israelis alike often hailing modern Israel as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, Palestinian Christians found themselves cast as the enemy of Israel both biblical

---

[486] Khalidi, *All That Remains*, 460-461.
[487] Elias Chacour, with David Hazard. *Blood Brothers*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1984, 2003), 145.
[488] Though scholarly convention now favors the term "Hebrew Bible," here I will use "Old Testament." I do this in part because the Palestinian Christian subjects of this chapter would use this term.

and modern. In readings of Exodus or Joshua, they were no longer "children of the promise." They were the Canaanites whom Joshua would invade, the Amalekites whose eradication God would ordain, the Jebusites in whose city David would begin an everlasting dynasty. "The Bible I had heretofore considered to be 'for us,'" Mitri Raheb mourns, "had suddenly become 'against us.'"[489]

This alienation is inseparable from issues of peoplehood, modern nationalism, and Christian supersessionism. For good and for ill, the Bible is bound up with the drama of peoplehood. Scripture not only emerged amid the election of Israel but has played a pivotal role in the formation of myriad peoples past and present—Ethiopian as well as English, Byzantine not less than African-American.[490] Though never entirely innocent, with the development of modern nationalism and imperialism the entanglement of scripture with the drama of peoplehood has become far more fraught. Among Christians, this issue is intertwined with our relation to Jews. Many contemporary theologians have argued—in response, above all, to the Holocaust—that Christians must cease to read themselves as the sole continuation of biblical Israel.

The case of Palestinian Christians provides an illuminating vantage point from which to survey these difficulties. Here is a people whose modern birth coincided not just with severing their ability to read themselves as Israel, but also strong pressure internally and externally to actively read themselves as the *enemies* of biblical Israel. What can it mean for Christians to read scripture well when history marks them as the enemies of the people of

---

[489] Mitri Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995) 56.
[490] For more on this, see my discussion of Adrian Hastings below as well as my brief discussion of Maria Stewart in section 4.

God? In the memoir and writings of Elias Chacour—more detailed than any other Palestinian Christian autobiography—we may discern the stubborn limits and joyful possibilities of a life lived under such a burden.

In what follows, I first explore the emergence of the entanglements of nationalism with the Bible, especially as it pertains to the national identity formation of Christians not just in Palestine but throughout the Middle East. Next, I turn to the life of Elias Chacour, who displays the challenges of living well with the Bible amid displacement deemed biblically justified. After reflecting on the significance of Chacour for contemporary discussions about the usability of texts like Joshua, I conclude with reflections on Christian peoplehood and non-supersessionism. In Elias Chacour and the witness of Palestinian Christians, I argue, we see how scripture can break open and re-signify in the wake of hermeneutical rupture. If nationalism tightens and restricts interpretation, Chacour's modes of reading loosen and intermingle. Though not without his own difficulties, Chacour demonstrates that the Bible has the capacity to form Gentile Christian peoples well as they read themselves *both* as Israel *and* as Israel's others. Scripture's ability to form a people can be a blessing, even as this very capacity provides a condition for the possibility of destructive nationalism. Holding to this capacity with charity and fortitude allows Chacour to read scripture as a book of life and not a book of death.

5.1 The Making of a Hermeneutical Rupture: Identity, Nationalism, and Nakba

In this first section I examine the history and context that has produced a situation in which Palestinian Christians find themselves cast in the role of the Promised Land's "others." First, however, I want to embed these transformations within the larger context of shifting Middle

Eastern Christian identities and their relation to scripture, so I begin with a story from my own experience in Iraq. Next, I survey debates about nationalism and the Bible before turning to a description of the way the logic of nationalism played out in the *Nakba*. Nationalism, I argue, created not only the material conditions but also the ideological shifts through which Joshua became a profoundly difficult text for Palestinian Christians.

5.1.1 Modern Christian identities in the Middle East

Once, during several years spent in northern Iraq, I asked an Assyrian friend named Hormiz how he read the Old Testament. As someone who traced an ethnic identity back to the ancient people of Nineveh, how did he read texts that frequently identified his ancestors as enemies of God's people?[491] Hormiz, in answer, immediately alighted on a complaint about Psalm 137, the great lament for Jerusalem. He wanted to know if I realized the psalm called for the murder of Babylonian children.

> Happy shall they be who take your little ones
> and dash them against the rock! (Psalm 137:8-9)

"I don't think God wanted that," he said. Because "Jews were the enemies of Babylon and Assyria," he argued it was natural that their prayers would include their desire for revenge—natural, but not praiseworthy. He compared this to what it might be like for the people of Iraq to write histories and psalms that included their anger toward Americans. As an American I would not like such histories, he suggested. I would love a different America than the one named in those prayers. Just so, the Assyria he loved was different. Its vast civilizational achievements

---

[491] Iraqi Christians tend to see themselves as Iraq's indigenous people, deeply connected to the pre-Islamic history of Mesopotamia. Some, though not all, identify their ethnicity as "Assyrian"—with Chaldean, Arab, Kurdish, and Syriac as competing labels loosely attached to denominational identities. For a contemporary Iraqi-American historian's perspective on this indigeneity, see Sargon Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the 20th Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

culminated, for Hormiz, in links to Christ and the earliest Christians. Here he mentioned the legend recorded in the fourth-century Syriac text *The Doctrine of Addai* that describes how King Abgar of Edessa wrote to Jesus and implored him to heal him of an illness.[492] Jesus, the legend states, sent the apostle Thaddeus/Addai to minister to him, along with a piece of cloth imprinted with an image of Christ's face, a lost relic that became known as the Mandylion.[493] Postbiblical links with Christ (supplemented, as this chapter's final section will elaborate, with contemporary liturgical enactments of the book of Jonah in the "Fast of Nineveh") enabled Hormiz to maintain a sense of Assyrian identity that was not in conflict with the main themes of the Bible, as he saw them. In addition, the colloquial use of Aramaic and the liturgical use of Syriac provided a deeply treasured linguistic connection to the life of Christ, enabling Hormiz to read himself in continuity with Jesus and his first-century followers, if not Israel.[494] Still, a text like Psalm 137, remained uniquely problematic for Hormiz and those who shared his Assyrian identity. The "little ones" whose death the psalm calls for were those of his long forebears.

This Assyrian identity, with its attendant hermeneutical ruptures, was refined and intensified by the tumult of the twentieth century and its rising nationalisms. During the Armenian genocide of 1915-1917, Turkish forces and Kurdish auxiliaries massacred and displaced not only Armenians but also members of the Church of the East, known as Assyrians, as well as other minority groups.[495] Hormiz's grandparents, with thousands of other Assyrians, fled south into what would become Iraq and Syria. In refugee camps, the new British colonial

---

[492] See *The Teaching of Addai: Texts and Translations,* trans. George Howard (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981).
[493] For more on the legend, see Mark Guscin, *The Image of Edessa* (Boston: Brill, 2009).
[494] For an ethnographic account of Syriac identity among the Syriac Orthodox in Bethlehem, see chapters 2 and 3 of Mark Calder's *Bethlehem's Syriac Christians: Self, Nation, and Church in Dialogue and Practice* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017).
[495] Around 200,000 Assyrians were killed in the genocide. Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 35.

administrators armed the refugees, creating the "Assyrian Levees," emphasized their separateness from the rest of the Iraqi population, and used them to great effect in putting down Iraqi revolts in conjunction with the British Royal Air Force.[496] Perversely, cultivating existing ethnic difference through use of an ethnic minority as an auxiliary force intensified the forces of inter-ethnic violence that was then itself repeatedly invoked as a justification for the necessity of continued colonial rule.[497] When the British Mandate ended in Iraq in 1932, the unresolved question of Assyrian settlement reached a crisis in the north of the new country when friction between the Iraqi army and Assyrian militias culminated in a massacre in the Assyrian village of Simele in 1933, with 600-3,000 casualties, including women and children.[498] Despite the fervent efforts of the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East to lobby the League of Nations for an Assyrian homeland in 1932—and abortive British efforts to provide such a homeland in Brazil or Canada—the Assyrian diaspora fanned out across northern Iraq, Syria, Europe, and North America.[499]

Hormiz's family moved to Syria after this episode, where they stayed for two generations. The 2011 Syrian Civil War would prompt their exodus once more, this time back to Iraq, where I learned to know him during an evening English class at his church. But this conversation with Hormiz was my last. He secured refugee status and left for Australia soon after.

---

[496] For the British authorities, these camps were, according to Robson, spaces "for the 'preservation' of ethnonational identities until such time as the refugees could be removed and resettled in a newly constituted independent Assyrian or Armenian nation." Robson, *States of Separation,* 36. Robson details the British use of Assyrian auxiliaries both here and in her essay "Peripheries of Belonging: Military Recruitment and the Making of a 'Minority' in Wartime Iraq," *First World War Studies* 7/1 (2016): 23-42.

[497] As Laura Robson puts it, "Ethnonational separation served simultaneously as a practical method of controlling colonial subjects and a rationale for imposing a neo imperial form of international governance." Robson, *States of Separation,* 6.

[498] Robson, *States of Separation,* 87.

[499] In a letter to the League, Mar Shimun wrote that Iraqi government policy "ignored the sacred minorities guarantees given to the League of Nations…the League of Nations betrayed us 1. by giving our old lands and homes to Turkey , 2., by handing us over to an Arab government." Quoted in Robson, *States of Separation,* 89.

Hormiz and his ancestors had found themselves outsiders to the Turkish national project in 1915, enemies of an Arab Iraqi national identity in 1933, and victims of ISIS' imperial vision of religious homogeneity in the 2010s. The deadly outworking of the logic of nationalism had sundered him finally from the land of the Assyrians.

This logic was voiced nowhere more clearly than in a 1938 speech by Michael Hansson, accepting that year's Nobel Prize for Peace on behalf of the League of Nations' refugee office. Outlining solutions to the "Jewish problem," he articulated the imperative of providing Jews with their own nation-state, "whether this be in America, Africa, or Australia does not really matter as long as they can be together *on their own*."[500] According to this logic, citizenship means belonging to a national community expressed in a state that administers a territory inhabited by an ethnically homogenous population. Peace comes from separation. By the time Hansson spoke those words, the twentieth century had already seen massive population "transfers" in the former Ottoman Empire alone, ranging from voluntary emigration to genocide. Aside from the Armenian and Assyrian genocides, the later Greek and Turkish transfers and Greek and Bulgarian transfers in the 1920s had just displaced millions of people in the birth of these young nation-states, enabling Greeks, Bulgarians, and Turks to be *together on their own.* These transfers enacted the nationalist dream. It was also enacted later in the 10-20 million Indians and Pakistanis displaced during the partition of India in 1947.[501] So too, the claims of German "minorities"—a new designation—outside Germany became the central propaganda tool of Nazi expansion in Central

---

[500] Michael Hansson, "The Nansen International Office for Refugees—Nobel Lecture." Emphasis mine. Accessed at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1938/nansen/lecture/>

[501] Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, "India–Pakistan Partition 1947 and Forced Migration," in ed. Emmanuel Ness, *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*, ed. Immanuel Ness (Blackwell Publishing, 2013), 1.

Europe in the 1930s. Such adjustments and transfers also presaged the logic of racial purity that governed the Holocaust.

However, this devastating logic of nationalism not only created the conditions for displacement, but also provided the frameworks through which it was endured and resisted, as Hormiz's story makes clear. The struggles of the twentieth century led to the development of Assyrian nationalism, with the creation of Assyrian political parties in Iraq and Syria in the middle part of the century, a widely used flag designed in 1968, and more recently in the wake of ISIS, Assyrian militias on the Nineveh Plains.[502] For Hormiz, this sense of communal belonging fueled his endurance as he sought to find refuge for his family. As he told me, his pride in being Assyrian came not least from the sense that, by preserving it, he was resisting those who had sought to extinguish it. And yet, this modern emergence of an Assyrian national movement, which fed on an intertwined ethnic-ecclesial identity, in turn widened a hermeneutical rupture with scripture.

Parallel dynamics emerged throughout Christian communities in the Middle East during the early part of the twentieth century. In Lebanon, for example, a revival of Phoenician identity served at times as a framework for a broader multisectarian Lebanese identity, and at times for a chauvinistic Maronite Christian supremacy. During the Lebanese Civil War, according to the historian Asher Kaufman, claims to Phoenician identity became a "prime argument" among Maronites for a distinctly Christian Lebanese nationalism, one that was "thoroughly different

---

[502] The modern construction of Assyrian identity is hotly debated. Adam Becker has recently argued that American Protestant missionaries played a key role in "awakening" Assyrian national consciousness in Iran. Meanwhile Sargon Donabed, an Iraqi-American historian, argues for its antique continuity. See Becker, *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); and Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2015). I hold that regardless of what it looked like before, in the twentieth century, Assyrian nationalism took on the trappings of other nationalist movements.

from the Arab-Muslim population of Lebanon, let alone the Palestinian refugees."[503] In Egypt, though a revival of "Pharaonic" identity faded under the rise of Arab nationalism, Coptic Christians maintain a sense of distinct Egyptian/Coptic identity—one that raises its own parallel hermeneutical difficulties to the Assyrian case.[504] As the Egyptian-American biblical scholar Safwat Marzouk puts it, "Christian Egyptians face a hermeneutical dilemma when they read the Hebrew Bible" because they are caught between their pride in Egyptian heritage and "a commitment to continue to read the Hebrew Bible as scripture despite its negative representation of Egypt."[505]

Palestinian Christians in Israel have seen a much more recent development in the revival of ancient identities—though largely unsuccessful and instigated from without. In 2014 the state of Israel recognized "Aramaic" as a new national minority identity.[506] A contemporary white paper from the Knesset's official Research and Information Center traces a direct line between "80-90% of the Christian Arab population of Israel" and ancient Aramean peoples.[507] It goes on to suggest that the ancient "Arameans maintained extensive ties with the Jewish people," noting that "Arameans and the Hebrew Patriarchs have shared origins and…marriage ties" that bound

---

[503] Asher Kaufman, *Reviving Phoenicia: In Search of Identity in Lebanon* (London: IB Tauris, 2004) 238. For these primarily Maronite intellectuals and clergymen, "the history of the Maronites was portrayed as a constant struggle against foreign occupiers, defending their national rights." 239.

[504] In a widely disseminated speech on Coptic identity, the Coptic Bishop Thomas in 2008 stated "We are not Arabs, we are Egyptians…the culture of ancient Egypt is still carried on [by Copts]." Bishop Thomas, "Coptic Christians: The Experience of the Middle East's largest Christian Community During a Time of Rising Islamization" Speech to the Hudson Institute, July 18, 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvcaL0n4KGA>

[505] Safwat Marzouk, *Egypt as a Monster in the Book of Ezekiel* (Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 2015), 10, 11. Marzouk suggests that Christian Egyptian readers tend to either discard the text or allegorize it, and he urges instead that they embrace the tension. Such reading places readers in a potentially generative "paradox; one is simultaneously an 'Egyptian' and an 'Israelite.'" 242.

[506] Maayan Lubell, "Israel Recognizes 'Aramaics' as a Separate Ethnic Group," *Reuters,* November 9, 2014.

[507] Eti, Weissblei, "Arameans in the Middle East and Israel: Historical Background, Modern National Identity, and Government Policy" *The Knesset Research and Information Center,* April 17, 2017, page 6. < https://m.knesset.gov.il/EN/activity/mmm/Arameans_in_the_Middle_%20East_and_%20Israel.pdf>

them together long ago and should bind them together once again.[508] Prominent Christian Arab-Israeli and Palestinian leaders immediately decried this new label as an attempt to divide Israeli Arabs, following the successful model of differential treatment for Israeli Druze.[509] But while rejecting an "Aramaic" identity as an Israeli construction, a number of Palestinian figures, Christian and Muslim, eagerly draw lines of connection between themselves and ancient Canaanites and Philistines as a way of asserting historical right to the land.[510]

However, Middle Eastern Christians have helped develop not only local and sectarian nationalisms, but a broader Arab nationalism as well. In addition to the large numbers of Christians involved in the *Nahda* renaissance of Arabic literature and culture in the late nineteenth century, Christians played essential roles in the development of pan-Arabist literature , history, and theory—consider as two examples the pan-Arab historian Constantine Zurayek in the first half of the twentieth century and the theorist Edward Said in the latter half.[511] Of more practical consequence, Michel Aflaq, of Greek Orthodox background, helped found the pan-Arab Ba'ath Movement, which would take power in Syria and Iraq. George Habash, a Palestinian Christian displaced in 1948, founded the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a party that would become one of the main factions making up the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The political and philosophical foundations of Arab nationalism ran through a milieu saturated with Christian intellectuals, albeit mostly secularized.

---

[508] Weissblei, "Arameans in the Middle East and Israel," 3.
[509] Hazran, "The Druzification of Arab Christians in Israel," 87.
[510] See, for example, Nur Masalha, *Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History* (London: Zed Books, 2018), 1, 3.
[511] Zureiq, a Syrian historian educated in the West, wrote a contemporary history of the events of 1948, coining the now indelible association between the word *Nakba* (disaster) with the massive Palestinian displacement and loss of national aspirations in that year. "The defeat of the Arabs in Palestine is no simple setback(*naksa/* نكسة) or light, passing evil. It is a disaster (*nakba/ نكبة*) in every sense of the word" Constantine Zureiq, *The Meaning of the Disaster* (معنى النكبة) translated by Bayly Winder (Beirut: Khayat's Blue Book Cooperative, 1948, translated 1956), 2.

The Lebanese and Reformed theologian George Sabra has provided a helpful classification of these dilemmas of identity. According to Sabra, Christians in the Middle East tend to either prioritize connections to Islam and Arabic culture and elevate their difference with the West, or emphasize Christian distinctiveness within the Middle East and highlight connections to the West—what he called, respectively, the "Arab Christian" and "Eastern Christian" approaches.[512] Sabra groups various forms of Christian ethnic nationalisms—Syriac/Assyrian, Coptic, Phoenician—among this latter option.[513] Sabra notes that this dichotomy is not only a feature of Middle Eastern Christian experience, but also Western media coverage and scholarship of Middle-Eastern Christianity.[514] This is most obvious in the politicization of Middle Eastern Christian suffering in the West over the past decade, with right-wing leaders emphasizing the fundamental hostility of Islam to Christianity and the left tending to elide the issue in order to present a monolithic oppressed Arab subject.[515]

Though Sabra argues that these two options have been and will continue to be the main options facing Christians in the region, neither promises him much hope. In the twentieth century, the "Arab Christian" project largely failed, as Arab nationalism, Arab socialism, and support for the Palestinian struggle all faced intractable problems. No current "third ground" on which Christians might found a common political project with Muslims and others show much promise (other, perhaps, than a revival of *national,* non-sectarian identity as exemplified in recent protest

---

[512] George Sabra, "Two Ways of Being a Christian in the Muslim Context of the Middle East," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17/1, 43-53.
[513] Ibid., 48.
[514] Ibid., 50.
[515] For a compelling critique of rightwing appropriations of Middle Eastern Christian suffering, see Mitri Raheb, *The Politics of Persecution: Middle Eastern Christians in an Age of Empire* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019).

movements in Lebanon and Iraq[516]). And yet, "Eastern Christian" approaches that foreground a distinctive identity also failed dramatically in the twentieth century, most destructively in the form of Maronite nationalism during the Lebanese Civil War. Middle Eastern Christian identity thus finds itself caught between losing options, both of which take the form of nationalist projects.

Nationalism created both the material and ideological conditions for the Bible to be read in newly difficult ways. Materially, the wars, genocides, and population transfers of the early twentieth century created situations of suffering and loss in which Christians might turn to scripture for solace. Here the Palestinian *Nakba* was no outlier. The whole arc of Middle Eastern demographics for a century and half has been toward national homogenization: the Turkish genocide against Armenians and Assyrians; the later expulsion of its Greek Orthodox population; the exodus of Mizrahi Jews from Arab countries; the ongoing displacement and dispossession of Palestinians; various persecutions against the Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran that culminated in Saddam Hussein's genocidal *al-Anfal* campaign in the 1980s and the continuing war between the Turkish state and the PKK and YPG; the more recent violence of ISIS directed against Yazidis, Christians, Shia, and others; all of these tragedies are punctuated by a steady flow of disproportionately Christian emigration that has reduced Christians from an estimated 20 percent of the Ottoman Empire's Middle Eastern territories in the nineteenth century to just three percent of the region's population today.[517] Each of these events has had historical precedent and each has had a complex mix of intra- and extra-regional causes. As the example of the Assyrian

---

[516] The protest movements in both countries have been generated by popular demands for functioning public services and against a political system constructed around sectarian difference. The galvanizing slogan in Iraq has been *we want a homeland! / nuriid watan*! / نريد وطن! . See Schluwa Sama, "We Need a Homeland," *Jacobin,* February 18, 2020. <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/02/iraq-protests-sadr-sectarianism>

[517] Raheb, *The Politics of Persecution,* 130.

Levees armed by the British against Iraqi revolts should make clear, Western intervention and colonialism deserve much blame, alongside authoritarian postcolonial administrations. But whatever the causes, the result has been uniform: a massive and unprecedented shift toward religious, ethnic, and linguistic homogenization in the region. Nationalism names one essential aspect of this horrific material transformation.

Localized expressions of various forms of nationalism, in turn, provided a language of resistance to nationalist oppression. For Hormiz and his parents and grandparents, an Assyrian identity not only exacerbated their suffering, leading to their continued persecution, but also provided a sense of pride and dignity that enabled them to endure it. But, for Hormiz and several other Middle Eastern Christian sects, these forms of nationalism themselves provided the ideological conditions under which hermeneutical ruptures in scripture opened up. Thus, nationalism provided both the material conditions and the ideological transformations that rendered the Bible difficult in new ways. Reading the Old Testament in the wake of 1948 is a distinctly difficult experience for many Palestinian Christians, but it is a difficulty embedded in this broader regional history.

5.1.2 Modern nationalism and the Bible

Modern nationalism, which has made the Bible more difficult, itself emerged in part from practices of Bible-reading. This is a minority view among scholars of nationalism. Influential figures like Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner tend to locate nationalism exclusively in the political economy of the very late eighteenth century onward. For Benedict Anderson, print-capitalism—above all in the mass European newspapers of the nineteenth century—enabled a sense of undifferentiated horizontal connection with large numbers of

people.[518] It was this, rather than some primordial sense of peoplehood, he insists, that formed what we call nationalism. Eric Hobsbawm too takes pains to sever any links between earlier conceptions of peoplehood and modern nationalism.[519]

In his *Construction of Nationhood,* Adrian Hastings has provided an alternative chronology and causal chain that centers Christianity as a driving force in the formation of ethnicities, nations, and nationalism. Without denying the importance of print capitalism for modern nationalism, Hastings argues for the centrality of earlier widespread vernacular literatures, anchored in Bible translations, as a precondition for the sense of peoplehood that then made possible the sorts of modern nationalism Anderson and others have described. For his part, Anderson sees an undifferentiated premodern era of international sacred languages that "offered privileged access to ontological truth" and so solidified the "great transcontinental sodalities of Christendom, the Islamic Ummah, and the rest."[520] He then offers his account of print capitalism as a revolution that overturned that premodern world. Hastings proceeds with more careful distinctions between religions and periods. For Hastings, Islam has indeed tended toward a kind of transnationalism, above all through its attachment to Arabic.[521] Christianity, despite parallel linguistic attachments to Latin, Greek, or Syriac, has tended eventually to contribute to the development of vernacular languages. This, for Hastings, is the indispensable ingredient.

---

[518] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* revised edition, (New York: Verso Books, 2006), especially page 36.
[519] "The basic characteristic of the modern nation and everything connected with it is its modernity." Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, second edition, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 14.
[520] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 36.
[521] Hastings argues that "while the Islamic socio-political impact was thus in principle almost entirely anti-ethnic and anti-national, the Christian impact was more complex. Its willingness to translate brought with it, undoubtedly, a reduction in the number of ethnicities and vernaculars, but then a confirmation of the individual identity of those that remained." Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, Nationalism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 179.

"Ethnicities naturally turn into nations or integral elements within nations at the point when their specific vernacular moves from an oral to written usage to the extent that it is being regularly employed for the production of a literature, and particularly for the translation of the Bible."[522] Here Luther's German Bible might spring first to mind, but earlier efforts like the Ethiopian[523] canon and Slavonic translations might be considered as well. The development of these languages and literatures is how "Christianity…helped turn ethnicities into nations."[524]

Hastings' argument illuminates the example of Assyrian identity with which I began. To put things in Hasting's formulation, we might venture the following: to identify as Assyrian is not a modern phenomenon, but Assyrian nationalism is a modern development. Over time, liturgical use of Syriac and conjoined vernacular uses of related Aramaic dialects helped form an ethnic identity for various Syriac-speaking churches, including the Church of the East, especially after the advent of Islam and the emerging dominance of Arabic. In the nineteenth century the new status of the Church of the East as an Ottoman *millet* strengthened this vague religious, ethnic, and political independence.[525] Then, in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a broadening base of literacy in Syriac helped foster stronger senses of Assyrian kinship, which emerged into the political, literary, and social forms we would now call Assyrian nationalism. What the example of Assyrian nationalism adds to Hastings' proposal is the way in which nationalism, in

---

[522] Hastings, *Construction of Nationhood,* 12.
[523] For Hastings, Ethiopia exemplifies the problems of the modernist chronology. "Here was an entirely rural people about as far removed from the Enlightenment as conceivable. Its national identity, both in continuous tradition and in the horizontal mass participation of the present through the rites and music of the Orthodox Church, was made possible only by its own vernacular literature" shared in the liturgy. Ibid., 151. As he says earlier on the same page, "Becoming a Christian meant becoming Amharic."
[524] Ibid., 179.
[525] For this transformation, see Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism,* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). "The evolution of the non-Muslim religious communities of the Ottoman Empire into officially recognized religio-political bodies (*millets*) with powers of taxation and collective representation in the eighteenth century provided opportunities for the empire's non-Muslims to create Anderson's "imagined communities," 11.

turn, shifts hermeneutical approaches to scripture. The nationalism that emerged in part out of linguistic and communal relations with the Bible now reframes those relations.

More recently, the theologian and New Testament scholar Tommy Givens has articulated a complementary theological diagnosis of Hastings' historical argument. For Givens, the modern nationalizing force of the Bible arose because of a fundamental error: supersessionism. How Christians commit this error of reading themselves exclusively as Israel is a sub-theme of this chapter. "The Christian supersessionism at work in Christendom leading up to modernity provided a key language, conceptuality, and optics for the imagination of modern peoplehood."[526] Rhetorically, I find the constructive edge of Givens' work compelling, aimed as it is at contemporary North American and European nationalism.

However, if some account of the Bible's centrality for the development of nationalism is true, and if this entanglement (especially in its supersessionist valences) is in some sense theologically suspect, surely one indispensable site to reflect theologically on this confluence is the modern state of Israel and the people it has displaced. If the problem with Christian nationalism is Christians reading themselves as Israel, we ought to investigate instances where Christians have been compelled to cease such readings. What we find with Palestinian Christians is that this cessation has been brought about not so much as a reparative response to nationalism, but as an alienation from their scriptures. Thus, a generalized and straightforward rejection of supersessionism is necessary but insufficient as a response to the challenges of Christian nationalism. The case of Elias Chacour and Palestinian Christians helps us see that the role of the

---

[526] On the same page he states, "Modern political order has therefore been made with a development of Christian supersessionism…and it is with that development that it remains burdened." Tommy Givens, *We the People: Israel and the Catholicity of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 3.

Bible in the development of nationalism is far more complex and requires more fine-grained responses. Having played a role in the emergence of nationalism, the Bible itself is read differently, now, under the aspect of nationalism.

5.1.3 The Nakba and Palestinian theologies of liberation

The Arab-Israeli war of 1948 was one of many culminations in emerging expressions of nationalism. Building on the framework of national states with ethnically homogeneous populations, partition emerged early on for the British colonial authorities as the preferred solution to the problem of Jewish and Arab coexistence in Palestine. Lebanon offered a concurrent model of such state-building, governed by the French desire to carve out a Christian-majority state based on Mount Lebanon's Maronite population.[527] In 1937 the British Peel Commission issued its report to the British government, for the first time recommending separating Palestine into two sovereign, ethnically homogenous states. "While neither race can fairly rule all Palestine, each race might justly rule part of it," they concluded.[528] This proposal was explicitly modeled on population transfers of the previous decades, especially the Greek-Turkish "transfers" during and after World War I, in which 1.3 million Greeks and 400,000 Turks were forcibly displaced. Summarizing this approvingly, the Peel Commission report stated, "before the [exchange] operation the Greek and Turkish minorities had been a constant irritant. Now the ulcer has been cleaned out, and Greco-Turkish relations, we understand, are friendlier than they have ever been before."[529] Within the nationalist framework, population transfers were necessary for a hygienic body politic. In Palestine, "the disease is so deeply rooted that…the only

[527] Robson, *States of Separation,* 107-108.
[528] Earl William Peel, et. al., "Summary of the Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 1937, summary of chapter 10. Accessed at <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/text-of-the-peel-commission-report>
[529] Peel, et. al., "Palestine Royal Commission Report," 1937, 12.40.

hope of a cure lies in a surgical operation."[530] Though less well known than either the earlier Balfour declaration or the later UN partition plan, the Peel Commission report was pivotal; in the words of Israeli historian Benny Morris, it "for the first time accorded the idea of transfer an international moral imprimatur."[531] For the head of the World Zionist Organization David Ben-Gurion, the report was a galvanizing sign of hope. "The compulsory transfer of the Arabs from the valleys of the proposed Jewish state" would be "an opportunity that we never dared to dream of…what is inconceivable in normal times is possible in revolutionary times….the crucial [step] – is conditioning ourselves for its implementation."[532] Ben-Gurion succeeded in convincing Zionist leaders to endorse the proposal as a starting point for negotiation. Meanwhile Arab leaders rejected the report as legitimizing theft—a pattern which would be often repeated.

When the newly formed United Nations assumed control of Palestine after World War II, it approved a new partition plan and set the stage for two mostly homogeneous states in historic Palestine. As in the case of India and Pakistan, the logic of national purity framed as orderly population transfer quickly devolved into war and massive forced population displacement. The newly declared state of Israel pushed Arab armies back to what is now known as the Green Line, forming the borders of the internationally recognized state of Israel and displacing around 700,000 Palestinians.[533] In the last few weeks before the IDF's "Operation Hiram" displaced Chacour from Bir'im, the new Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion had told the Israeli cabinet that if fighting broke out again in the north, the Galilee should become "clean"

---

[530] Peel, et. al., "Summary of the Report of the Palestine Royal Commission," 1937, summary of chapter 9.
[531] Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited,* 48.
[532] Quoted in Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited,* 47-8.
[533] The consensus figure. See Benny Morris, "Appendix 1," in *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited,* 602-604.

(*naki*) and "empty" (*reik*) of Arabs.[534] The politics of nationalism and the language of security founded on ethnic purity played out in the microcosm of the Galilee in 1948.

Writ large, this loss is the Palestinian *Nakba,* the "catastrophe" around which contemporary Palestinian life pivots. Palestinian refugees flooded into Gaza and the West Bank—then controlled by Egypt and Jordan—as well as southern Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. Historians debate the intentionality of this displacement, with some arguing that it was a premeditated and centrally organized campaign of ethnic cleansing to enable a homogeneous Jewish state to emerge, and others arguing that it happened in an ad hoc fashion because of the fighting.[535] Practically, it makes little difference: the effect was a massive displacement that left most Palestinians homeless on the peripheries of the new, not-quite homogeneous state of Israel.

Since then Christians have remained a small and internally divided yet influential part of the Palestinian people. Out of a total population of around 6 million Palestinians in both Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories today, Christians number around 200,000. (Christians from a relatively larger portion of the Palestinian diaspora in the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas, for Christians have emigrated at much higher rates than Muslims.[536]) Three-quarters of the 200,000 live in Israel proper, with most of the remainder in the West Bank, and very few in Gaza. The Greek Orthodox church claims the largest number of Palestinian Christians, at about

---

[534] Quoted in Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited,* 463.
[535] The question of central coordination of forced displacement is the key issue in historiography of the war. Even pro-Zionist historians like Benny Morris by now recognize a high degree of intentionality in IDF displacement policy, but insist that such measures were justified and also not totally coordinated or systematic. Ilan Pappe, meanwhile, insists that the persistence of an Arab-Israeli minority inside Israel was simply an effect of a coordinated and centrally orchestrated plan incompletely carried out and hindered by the end of the war.
[536] Rania Al Qass Collings, Rifat Odeh Kassis, Mitri Raheb, *Palestinian Christians in the West Bank: Facts, Figures and Trends 2nd* edition, (Diyar Publishing, 2012), 15.

half, followed by the Roman Catholic church and various Eastern rite Catholic churches, followed by the Syriac Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, and evangelical groups.[537]

Aside from statements of resistance, Palestinian Christian leaders in the decades immediately following the *Nakba* produced little systematic theological reflection on the problems of Palestinian identity and displacement. However, with the increase of Christian Zionism in the West after the 1967 Six-Day War, the growth of popular apocalypticism (especially in the United States), and the increasing indigenization of Catholic clergy in Palestine,[538] this changed. In the 1980s, Palestinian theologians began framing the national struggle in the terms of liberation theology, something which came to fruition in Naim Ateek's 1989 work, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation.* Ateek helped found the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in Jerusalem in 1993. The *al-Liqa'* Center for Religious and Heritage Studies founded in 1982 engages in similar work, but it is framed as "contextual" rather than "liberation" theology.[539] The most important ecumenical work among Palestinian Christian theologians has been the "Kairos Palestine" document. Following the 1985 "Kairos Document" authorized by South African theologians during apartheid, in 2009 a group of Palestinian Christian leaders led by Michel Sabbah, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, put out a

---

[537] Bernard Sabella, "Palestinian Christians: Challenges and Hopes," *Al-Bushra.* <https://web.archive.org/web/20100415005256/http://www.al-bushra.org/holyland/sabella.htm> Because of their connections to the English-speaking world, Catholic and Protestant Palestinians are over-represented in literature on the Palestinian Christian experience.

[538] Until the 1987 appointment of Michel Sabbah, for example, the Latin Patriarchs of Jerusalem had all been Italians for centuries.

[539] For an overview of this distinction, and a broader account of the emergence of Palestinian Christian theology, see Alain Epp Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land: Thinking Theologically About the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 46-67.

shared statement under the name "Kairos Palestine." The document called for an end to the Israeli occupation and solidarity from Christians around the world.[540]

As this chapter's introduction suggested in its profile of the settler in Sasa and Elias Chacour, the nationalism of the modern period has brought about an intimacy between the peoplehood of present-day residents of the Middle East and the peoples of scripture. The words of Joshua feel closer now than they had before 1948. Such intimacy is not unique to the modern period or to the Middle East. Christians, at least, have tended to read themselves in continuity with biblical figures and peoples, for good and for ill. This very pattern fostered the development of modern nationalism. But the nationalism that itself emerged in part from modes of Bible-reading now in turn has transformed the way the Bible is heard and read. That transformation has carried with it intense joys and sorrows. The joy, perhaps most of all, of those contemporary Jews who see in the establishment of the state of Israel a blessed respite after centuries of exile, and the fulfillment of biblical promises. The sorrow, most of all, of Palestinians who have found a bitter intimacy thrust upon them—an intimacy between themselves and the biblical figures of those conquered and displaced with divine approval.

How, after 1948, can Joshua's words bless? In 1989 Naim Ateek wondered "how can the Old Testament be the word of God in light of Palestinian Christians' experiences with its use to support Zionism?"[541] In a 1993 pastoral letter, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Michel Sabbah asked,

---

[540] Criticizing uses of the Bible to justify occupation and dispossession, "Kairos Palestine" mourns that "The 'good news' in the Gospel itself has become 'a harbinger of death' for us." "Kairos Document," 2.3.3. <https://www.kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-kairos/kairos-palestine-document>

[541] Naim Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (MaryKnoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989) 78.

"could we be the victims of our own salvation history, which seems to favor the Jewish people and condemn us?"[542] What does it mean to read, as a people, from the underside of election?

5.2 Reading from the Underside of Election: The Life of Elias Chacour

Convinced that the answer to this question requires not so much a hermeneutical method as a process of moral formation over time, I turn to the life of Elias Chacour.[543] Chacour was born in Kafr Bir'im on the northern edge of Galilee in Mandatory Palestine in 1939. During the *Nakba* of 1948, he, his family, and all the other residents of the town were forced to leave by the IDF. However, they were displaced into depopulated villages still inside the territory of what would be declared Israel. Thus they became citizens of Israel, though they were forbidden to return to Bir'im, and a Jewish kibbutz named Baram was founded near the site. As a Greek Catholic, or Melkite, Chacour became a priest, eventually serving for many years in the town of Ibillin and becoming a prominent voice for nonviolent and reconciliatory assertions of Palestinian rights, with a global audience through his authorship of books like *Blood Brothers* (1984) and *We Belong to the Land* (1991). In 2006 he was elected Greek Catholic Archbishop of northern Israel. He retired from this position in 2014, ostensibly for health reasons. However, shortly before his retirement, a charge of sexual harassment was made against him by a former employee, and this probably prompted his retirement.[544]

---

[542] Michel Sabbah, "Reading the Bible in the Land of the Bible," Fourth Pastoral Letter, November 1998, section 7, in *Faithful Witness: On Reconciliation and Peace in the Holy Land* (New York: New City Press, 2009), 26.
[543] Unlike the two other figures I explored in this dissertation, I met Elias Chacour. On a study abroad semester in Israel-Palestine in 2010, I visited the Archbishop's residence in Haifa.
[544] Judith Sudilovsky, "Pope Accepts Resignation of Israeli Melkite Archbishop," *National Catholic Reporter,* January 29, 2014. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/world/pope-accepts-resignation-israeli-melkite-archbishop>

Like John Jea and Anna Jansz, does not function as a heroic exemplar of virtue for this chapter. Rather, his life and work together display both the limits and the possibilities of living well with the difficult confluence of nationalism, election, and the figures of scripture. Chacour models an assertive fortitude in his engagement with scripture—a playful tenacity ordered toward love. He demonstrates a hopeful vision of the way scripture can form a Gentile Christian people by figuring both Israel and Israel's biblical others. This fortitude finds expression not so much in detailed exegesis as in a life of institution-building. Just as Chacour asserts that Palestinian Christians might be at home in scripture, he asserted a place for all—Christians, Muslims, and Jews—in Israel-Palestine through the character of his educational initiatives. But such assertive tenacity risks both overbalance and exclusion, and his life was not without these failures. In what follows, then, I provide a reading of Chacour's life, focused primarily on his autobiographical text *Blood Brothers.*

5.2.1 Blood Brothers

From its first pages, *Blood Brothers* paints a portrait of a people whose lives are intertwined with the land and its sacred history, an intimacy mediated by scripture. Chacour describes encountering scripture first through the stories his illiterate mother told from the Gospels.

> Mother said He had come to Galilee first, to our hills and our people, after his temptation in the wilderness. It was from His lips that we first heard the good news: God and man were reconciled. Perhaps some forefather Chacour had eaten bread and fish miraculously multiplied by Jesus' hand. Maybe a Chacour boy or girl felt the brush of His fingertips when he blessed the little children….These wonders were real to me, for they had occurred on streets and in homes like those I saw every day.[545]

[545] Chacour, *Blood Brothers,* 34-35. Further citations from this memoir will be noted parenthetically.

This history rooted Chacour and his people in the land and gave them a vocation of ongoing witness. Responding directly to hardline Zionist claims of Palestinian transiency (Palestine as a "land without a people"), Chacour writes "we were not like some weed newly sprung up after rain, but our spiritual heritage was firmly rooted in the first century" (39). An ancient presence, then, but not a competitive one: "Our lives were bound together with the other people who inhabited Palestine—Jews. We had suffered together under the Romans, Persians, Crusaders, and Turks" (40).

This idyll soon dissolved. In 1948, soldiers from the IDF come to the village. "These Zionist soldiers were not at all like our Jewish neighbors who chatted in the yard with Father over coffee" (44). He goes on to describe the broader events of 1948 as an extraordinary failure of justice, in which the initial UN partition plan itself unfairly divided the land—"the Zionists were given possession of the *majority* of Palestine—fifty-four percent—even though they only owned seven percent of the land"—and terror at the predations of the Irgun, who massacred over a hundred civilians at the Arab town of Deir Yassin (46). At these excesses, he reports, "the native Jewish people were shocked and disgusted" (48).

After several weeks of occupation, the IDF soldiers ordered the residents of Bir'im to leave their homes temporarily, putatively for their own safety. After staying for a few nights in some nearby olive groves, Chacour recounts how some villagers ventured back to inquire about a return, only to discover that their homes had been looted and they were prohibited entry. "The betrayal cut like a knife—tricked out of our village by these European men we had trusted" (53). Eventually many of the villagers settled in a nearby town called Jish. While playing soccer there

with other children, he discovered a shallow mass grave with a dozen bodies.[546] More immediate terror came when soldiers deported his father and brothers to Jordanian-held territory. Chacour recalls the soldiers telling his mother "we are taking your terrorists away" (60). Soon after this, soldiers beat Chacour and accused him of stealing some telephone wire from the construction of Kibbutz Baram. This kibbutz had been founded on the edges of their former village—Bir'im, whose land had now officially been confiscated and sold to settlers. Chacour's own father, when he managed to return from deportation, took up work in the orchards that had formerly been his. Consumed by anger, Chacour, "drew away from [his] family" to find solace in solitude on the land. "The sheep on the hillside, the twisted ancient olive trees, the far off blue hills of the Golan Heights…all these things reminded me of my constant Champion" (77).

The land drew him to Christ and his teachings on the nearby Mount of Beatitudes. But this interpenetration between land and text also presented him with a problem. The Beatitudes, associated as they were in Chacour's mind with his father's seemingly passive response to dispossession, became a simultaneous source of both pain and comfort. When he was beaten on false charges of sabotage, he found solace in Jesus' admonition that "in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (77) And yet the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount seemed to offer no constructive response to oppression—only acquiescence. "Were there only two choices left to us—surrender to abuse or turn to violence? (79). For Chacour, his deep attachment to Christ and the land presented him with a profound dilemma. That attachment necessitated a refusal of retributive violence. But such a refusal could only, as he saw it, alienate

---

[546] Benny Morris writes that in Jish IDF troops of the Seventh Brigade "murdered about 10 Moroccan POWs (who had served with the Syrian Army) and a number of civilians, including, apparently, four Maronite Christians, and a woman and her baby." *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited,* 481.

him from his connection to the land. Would he betray Christ to remain on the land? Or would he remain faithful to Christ and thus be displaced from the land that drew him to Christ?

Life moved on, but this deep, conflicted attachment remained. Chacour attended a special orphanage school in Haifa, beginning a long path toward the priesthood. Meanwhile, the Israeli Supreme Court in 1951 ordered that the villagers of Bir'im be allowed to return to their homes, an order which the army ignored. When presented with a second court order, the army demolished Bir'im on September 16-17, 1953.[547]

Just before this, Chacour had begun seminary at a Melkite school in Nazareth. There he grew increasingly frustrated at the church hierarchy for their seeming inaction against the Israeli state's encroachments. "Why were we not angry…at the suffering of our people?" (105). Once again he confronted the impotence of the Beatitudes. "Suddenly they were terribly disturbing. Why did they sound so embarrassingly contradictory? How could you be meek and inherit anything in this power-hungry world? And if you tried to live in happiness and peace, wouldn't someone just kick you out of your home, bomb it, and sell off your land?" (101). Chacour began to see that his "deepest wound" was "the need for a home, a sense of *place"* (108).

But Chacour moves even further from home, traveling to Paris to finish seminary at Saint-Sulpice. In Paris, Chacour revels in the opportunity for freedom and study, but finds himself once more alienated, this time by his church. Chacour recalls discussing Palestinian losses in the *Nakba* with seminarians and professors who, he recounts, responded that "the Zionists had to do something to protect themselves from terrorists" (113). He even attended a Christmas party where he was introduced as a Messianic Jew from Bethlehem, an intentional lie

---

[547] For more on the destruction of Bir'im, see Khalidi, *All That Remains,* 460-461 and Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Reconsidered,* 505-509.

his host told because it made him more palatable. “In Western eyes, being Palestinian was a disgraceful thing—a stigma like leprosy” (115).

On Chacour’s telling, the Holy Spirit intervened to prevent this alienation from festering into bitter hatred. On a trip to visit friends he had made in West Germany, Chacour recounts a transformative moment when he reflected on the Holocaust and felt a reflection of its terror. “For the first time that twisting dark feeling inside me was matched—if not totally overruled—by another feeling: the ache of compassion. It was as if some calming hand was beginning to tame a wild creature within me. I hurt for the Jewish people” (121). He also studied the history of Zionism, including binational and pacifist strands like the Brit Shalom movement, and figures like Martin Buber. He realized that “all Jews did not hate Palestinians” and many “had come to Palestine with hands extended in friendship” (128). He saw, in that moment, that his enemies were not Jews. “For the first time I saw clearly the face of my true enemy…It was not the Zionists, but the demon of Militarism” (135). Now he could “view the Zionists as victims too…stricken with a disease of the spirit” (134).[548] His true vocation, he saw, was the struggle for peace against this demon.

If saved from a self-destructive hatred of those who had dispossessed him, Chacour still needed to discern the shape of his vocation among his own people. When Chacour completed seminary and returned to Palestine he visited Bir’im on the way to his ordination service in Nazareth. With the heart of the village land now made into a public park it was once more open for its people to return, but always as tourists. Signs around the ruins of Bir’im indicated only that

---

[548] Chacour’s language here echoes that of the Jewish theologian Marc Ellis, “Jews have indeed returned to Jerusalem in triumph and in a boldness that defies expectation. In doing so we have wounded the Jewish spirit.” *O, Jerusalem! The Contested Future of the Jewish Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 164.

"these 'antiquities' were 'preserved and protected' by the government," with no indication that Palestinians had lived there scarcely a decade earlier (143). His home was ruined, but "my special fig tree," carefully grafted from different varieties by his father, flourished. In his memoir this visit and the encounter with this tree provides an occasion for his longest reflections on the complexities of election, scripture, and history.

For Chacour, this fig tree represented a peaceful vision of Romans 9-11. "We Gentiles had been 'grafted in' among God's chosen people of faith" (145). But "how terribly sad that men could ignore God's plan for peace between divided brothers, even supporting one group as it wielded its might to force out the other" (145). For Chacour, it was plain that Jews and Christians shared a vocation just as they ought to share the land. In Paris, his fellow seminarians and his professors "had often become furious in discussions when I stated that Palestinians also had a God-given right to live in Israel." But, he fiercely asked, "*Were we not 'children of the promise, regarded as Abraham's offspring*'?" (145).

His interlocutors had argued that God had promised to regather Israel in the land. He agreed. But for Chacour, the land belonged to no people, only God. And the promise of living in the land was not an inalienable property right, but an invitation into a hospitable mode of life. Thus the question of the land was not properly a question of exclusive ownership, but vocation. Here, Abraham—rather than Joshua, Chacour implies—was the best model. The Lord "gave" the land to Abraham, but "he did not plow through the land, driving out its inhabitants, wielding power to establish his ownership by 'right.'…He knew he was not by any means the first inhabitant of Canaan to worship the one true God" (147). Abraham sought to live alongside his neighbors and acknowledged their belonging to the land and their belonging to God—above all that of Melchizedek. "Never did Abraham try to wrest Melchizedek's throne from him, nor did he

take over anyone's land. He lived as a nomad…when his wife Sarah died, he very meekly *purchased* a cave in Hebron for her tomb" (147, emphasis original).

Right occupation of the land and right worship are inseparable from vocation, from the way of living in the land—from *Torah*, although Chacour doesn't put it thus. Living in the land had a purpose. "God demanded that they demonstrate His own character to the whole world" (147). For Chacour, remarkably, the modern ingathering of the Jewish diaspora in Israel might rightly be seen by Christians as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. But if it is to truly be a fulfillment, the people of Israel must live once again into the vocation of hospitable inhabitation modelled by Abraham, something he frames unfortunately in language about Jewish exclusiveness. In once more gathering Jews into Palestine, "God was requiring a true change of heart in the Jewish people, a change in their traditional exclusiveness which caused them to believe that they alone were God's favored ones" (149). This change had yet to happen. "Israel had returned to the land not in righteousness, but as my oppressor. As a Christian, I knew that I was grafted spiritually into the true family of Israel" and "*how sad,* I thought, *that we have been cut off like unwanted branches."* (150, emphasis original). If in Romans 11 it is the Gentiles who are grafted in while "some of the branches were broken off," here Chacour positions Palestinian dispossession as another severing, the *Nakba* as an undoing of the reconciliation of the cross.

The spiritual challenge, for Chacour, was how to inhabit the same spiritual vocation as Israel in light of this break. "I had just as difficult a calling as a blood son of Israel. I could not join with the violent bands who were now attacking the country….But neither could I live by the passive ways of Father and the other elders" (15). Again, the promises of the Beatitudes seemed impotent.

In *Blood Brothers* he finds a resolution to this difficulty on the land itself. Stopping at the Mount of Beatitudes on his way to Nazareth, he hears the words of Jesus in a new way. "The Beatitudes were prophecies! Not mere platitudes" (152). He hears the lists of blessings as not merely an abstract recommendation, but words that speak his own life into being. In Jesus' own ministry, he had "set out to fulfill His purpose of grafting Jews and Gentiles into one family" and Chacour feels his own vocation in consonance with this purpose. When he recalls the words "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," he hears this as a promise that the "true sons of Israel, whether of Jewish or Gentile origin" would live in the land together (153). When he remembers that "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness…will be filled," this, to him, signifies his vocation as someone dedicated to "lift up, as Jesus had, the men and women who had been degraded and beaten down"—a vocation first and foremost for the renewal of dignity (154). "Only by regaining their shattered human dignity could they begin to be reconciled to the Israeli people, whom they saw as their enemies." (154). This, finally, was "a true beginning." The Beatitudes were a summons not to passivity, but to a vocation of love that included gracious self-assertion and a renewal of dignity. This experience resolved for Chacour the dilemma that overshadowed his sense of vocation. No longer did he experience a paralyzing tension between Jesus' words of peace and the needs of a people seeking redress for wrong. His ability to see the humanity of his enemies, and thus recognize the demonic reality of his true enemy—"militarism"—allowed the Beatitudes to function for him not as counsels of acquiescence, but teachings of steadfastness (*sumud*), whose end was peace with justice. The Beatitudes, finally, did not announce a pallid blessing over failure. They proclaimed the dignity of the oppressed to be *good* without precondition, before justice was achieved. As Chacour heard them, these words

were the promise that Palestinian Christians could live lives of moral dignity even as they suffered the loss of land, peoplehood, and history.

Ordained in Nazareth and newly purposeful, Chacour received an assignment in the mid-1960s to the small town of Ibillin in Galilee and served there as an agent of reconciliation within his own Melkite community. Chacour began his ministry amid churches in disarray. During the war of 1948, much of the church leadership had fled, and "after the creation of the state of Israel it was impossible to bring in Arab priests" (15). Palestinians who remained in Israel were left to fend for themselves against continuing land confiscations after 1948, without the benefit of their religious and civic leadership structures. The ordination of Arab Israelis represented, Chacour later recounts, "a rebirth of Christian hope in the Holy Land."[549]

Chacour arrived to find the small parish church in disrepair and riven with factional disputes in the village. In addition, many former congregants had been alienated from the church hierarchy because of the same passivity Chacour had militated against. Villagers were angry "that the church leadership avoided issues of justice and equality and seemed to court the new government that fought against us. Rather than face the Zionists, the bishops and archbishops seemed more interested in preserving their shrines—the 'holy stones'—and did not speak out" on behalf of the "living stones" (160). Indeed, in a later writing, Chacour reveals that not only had the Melkite hierarchy refused to support Ibillin's villagers in their struggles against land confiscation; they had also excommunicated those who took part in protests, leading to a significant exodus into the local Greek Orthodox church. One excommunicated villager told him "the Melkite bishop was sympathetic not to us who were losing the land, but to the Israeli

---

[549] Chacour, with Mary Jensen, *We Belong to the Land,* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 15.

government. He was aligned with them against us, his own people."[550] Chacour's frustrations with the Melkite hierarchy would continue for a number of years, culminating many years later when his bishop at the time, who was Lebanese, chose to the attend the funeral of a prominent Lebanese Christian militia commander who had participated in massacres against Palestinian refugees instead of a funeral in the Galilee for a family who had been killed in a car crash. "The bishop's residence in Haifa…seemed to us to be a stronghold for the Phalangist army in Lebanon."[551]

Chacour found himself engaged in the slow and patient work of repair, visiting families and attempting to rekindle trust. This anger and loss of relationship found a focal point in the activities of the parish's Responsible, who sought to dictate Chacour's ministry and maintain the strict excommunications. Filled with fiery determination, he nevertheless knew he could not seize control from the local Responsible, "in that way, I would look like one more power-grasping tyrant" (163). Indeed, here in Ibillin, Chacour came face to face with his own rage far more than he had in interactions with Israelis. One night, faced with an intractable family dispute involving four brothers, he saw a vision of all that he had suffered thus far. Corrupt church officials flashed across his mind, then the face of the Responsible of the Ibillin church who obstructed his every move, and then he replayed earlier scenes, "fellow seminarians who had slandered all Palestinians" and then further back to the soldiers who had destroyed Bir'im, and finally, the memory of his own flogging at the hands of Israeli military police as a young boy, for a theft he did not commit. Engaged in fantasies of violence against all these enemies, he realized that "from the time I had been beaten as a small boy, I had denied the violence inside me" (175). Now,

---

[550] Ibid., 24.
[551] Ibid., 157.

"aware for the first time that I was capable of vicious, killing hatred," Chacour simultaneously experiences forgiveness. "The taming hand that had taught me compassion on the border of West Germany" and "the change that had begun…on the Mount of Beatitudes" now were "complete" (175). The Spirit was channeling Chacour's anger toward more fruitful ends.

Armed once more with a vision of overflowing love, Chacour committed himself again to the work of reconciliation in his village with renewed intensity. On Palm Sunday, he locked the doors of his church with everyone inside and refused requests to exit until old feuds had been resolved and warring factions reconciled. "If you *will not* forgive, we will stay locked in here" (177). The center of the conflict, he recounted, was the local policeman, Abu Muhib, and his relation to his brothers and to the village at large. Though he elides this in *Blood Brothers*, Chacour clarifies later that this conflict too was tied to the broader political struggle. As a policemen employed by the Israeli state, Abu Muhib had sided with the oppressors. And this Sunday, he had come to church "dressed in his Israeli police uniform."[552] Echoing Jesus' encounter with the tax collector, however, it is this symbol of collaboration who manifests the contrition that heralds new birth. After several minutes of stillness, "I saw Abu Muhib slowly stand, his police uniform instantly identifying him to every eye" and say "I ask forgiveness of everybody here."[553] Chacour's unorthodox methods bear fruit in an outpouring of love and transformation as congregants sought forgiveness from one another. "I was seeing a ruined church rebuilt at last—not with mortar and rock, but with living stones" (179).

For the rest of *Blood Brothers,* Chacour recounts small and uncertain steps along the way of this vocation of reconciliation. While studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, he is

---

[552] Ibid., 29.
[553] Ibid., 32.

overcome with sadness as he watches Western Christians celebrate the results of the 1967 war as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. "My difficult work at reconciling the Christians of Ibillin seemed so puny, so worthless in light of what I had just seen…if Israel was so squarely in the center of prophecy and God's will, why was the nation coming unglued from within?" (186). After organizing a peace march in Jerusalem to protest the continuing injunction against people of Bir'im returning to settle in their village, Chacour wondered about the efficacy of his work for reconciliation when his people had little in the way of livelihood. "How could I begin to get them across the bridge with me?" (201). Chacour turned to the creation of community centers, libraries, and schools in poor towns in the Galilee as a means of fostering dignity, self-worth, communal cooperation, and economic prosperity.

Time and again, however, he comes up against barriers that he cannot cross. As part of a summer camp for youth, on February 17, 1979, he led a procession to the ruins of Bir'im to plant olive trees.[554] The Israeli government had turned the former village into a national park, adding many trees to what had been fields and streets, and thereby erasing the evidence of inhabitation, and centering the appeal of the park on the ruins of the ancient synagogue. By bringing saplings, Chacour and his procession asserted their continuing relation to the land—in the same spirit, descendents of the displaced would hold weddings and funerals in the ruins.[555] But when Chacour arrived at the gates of the park, the Israeli military prohibited their entry. "I had led them to a bridge and we could not get across. Could we ever?" (216).

---

[554] Ibid., 114.
[555] For more on this, see Alain Epp Weaver's chapter, "Kafr Bir'im, Elias Chacour, and the Arboreal Imagination," in his *Mapping Exile and Return: Palestinian Dispossession and a Political Theology for a Shared Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

Blood Brothers does not end in triumph, but endurance amid continuing loss, summarized by one final tragic act that calls to mind the forms of nationalism with which this chapter began. At the beginning of the 1980s Chacour, burnt out, decided to accept a teaching post in Europe (223). In preparation for this he gave a series of lectures in West Germany. He recalls embarking on one of these, engaging in his usual rhetoric about reconciliation and the transformational power of the Beatitudes, but feeling "a certain flatness about my words" (225). In the middle of the lecture a friend interrupted him, saying "Abuna [Father], you have not heard the news?" At the height of the Lebanese Civil War, Christian Phalangist militias, with the tacit permission of the IDF, had just massacred around 3,000 civilians in the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut. He would later learn that his young cousin Amira had been killed by an Israeli bombing campaign in Beirut around the same time.[556] Chacour had visited the Sabra refugee camp just months earlier and was briefly kidnapped by PLO forces who suspected that he was an Israeli agent attempting to infiltrate the camp. Galvanized by pain, Chacour returned to the Galilee.

> If I simply allowed time to sift its dust over these latest deaths, I would be like those who had ignored the sufferings of Jews for centuries, or like those who had turned their backs on my own people. Like those others, I had been trying to find the easy life of blindness to pain…Could I, by continuing the long, slow labor of teaching young people the treasures of the Sermon on the Mount, point them toward true peace?...That inner calm pressed in on me again, as I had not felt it for a long, long time—a calm that seemed to come from a familiar, taming hand (227).

In that moment, Chacour says, "I knew where I should be—not living in comfort, but back in the place where villages and churches were being reunited, where schools and community centers and spirits were being built up, where amid the terrible noise of violence I could hear the

---

[556] Chacour, *We Belong to the Land,* 154.

whispers of the Man of Galilee, saying, *Behold, I make all things new*." (228, emphasis original). When he returned to Ibillin, he continued his educational work, founding a high school with an emphasis on inter-religious peace education and integrating it with the kindergarten he had already established, forming Mar Elias Educational Institutions.

He concludes *Blood Brothers* in the 2002 edition with a call to Israelis to listen to the "voices of *all* the dead" who cry out "'Cain, Cain, what have you done with your brother?'" and "you, Ahab, king of Israel: 'What have you done in the vineyard of Naboth the Palestinian? You killed him and you think you will inherit the land?'" (230). He speaks also to "my own Palestinian people" counseling steadfast endurance without violence: "Do we need to produce more martyrs?"

5.2.2 Chacour's sexual harassment

In the early 1990s Chacour lamented that "my life as a clergyman in our institutional church has been a tragic story of disappointment and of successive shocks and scandals."[557] Despite this pessimistic tone, Chacour went on to become the Melkite Archbishop for northern Israel in 2006. But his self-description, while aimed at ecclesiastical figures from earlier in his career, continued to prove correct. In 2013 Chacour was questioned by the Israeli police over an accusation of sexual harassment by a woman who worked in one of the institutions with which Chacour was affiliated.[558] His 2014 resignation seemed to come in response to this accusation, and perhaps also in responses to accusations of mismanagement and personal conflicts.

---

[557] Ibid., 158.
[558] Judith Sudilovsky, "Pope Accepts Resignation of Israeli Melkite Archbishop," *National Catholic Reporter*, January 29, 2014. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/world/pope-accepts-resignation-israeli-melkite-archbishop>

How should we read the story of his life, in light of its apparent close? The heart of Chacour's interpretive response to scriptural entanglement with Palestinian dispossession was an assertion of agency, collective and individual. Chacour's charisma placed him at the center of an expanding range of institutions—community centers, a high school, and a university. He is an example of what Vincent Lloyd has recently called "democratic charisma." He exhibited the sort of charisma that illuminates a world of action into which others may step, calling on "an audience to join in."[559] But democratic charisma "is also precarious: it can quickly become authoritarian," if the picture the charismatic leader paints is too perfect, too seamless, if it requires nothing of its listeners except assent to the leader's vision.[560] Chacour's life demonstrates the fine edge between democratic and authoritarian charisma—mixed, as they almost always are. His story was indeed, as he put it, a "tragic story of disappointment and of successive shocks and scandals." Tragic, in the sense that such charisma both enables collective survival and simultaneously creates the possibility for abuses of power.

Here and elsewhere I venture a theological biography not to make a case for sainthood, as it were, but to analyze the limits and possibilities of living well with difficult scriptures. What I seek to discern in Chacour's life is not a conceptual system. Rather, I have sought to display in his life the difficulties of living well with scriptures that seem to compel subordination and passivity in the face of dispossession. I turn to him in part as an exemplar of interpretive virtue, but also as a demonstration of interpretive risk.

For me, as a Mennonite, the spectre of Yoder looms large here. Am I propping up the legacy of another deeply abusive man? I do not know. But I worry. I once met former Cardinal

---

[559] Vincent Lloyd, *In Defense of Charisma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 139.
[560] Lloyd, *In Defense of Charisma*, 46.

Theodore McCarrick and came away convinced that he was a paragon of pastoral love, with little idea of the horrors he had perpetrated. I once met Elias Chacour too, briefly, on a study abroad semester in 2010 that took me to Haifa. I was charmed. There is little indication that Chacour's case is like Yoder's or McCarrick's. But I have learned not to place much weight in my own impressions. The best I can say is this: what I venture here is a *provisional* reading of a life. I could be terribly wrong. In the meantime, I offer it convinced that as it stands, given the publicly available information, Chacour provides us with a more thorough and compelling narration of this struggle than any comparable figure.

5.3 The Wounds of Election

In this section I explore the ways in which Chacour is wounded in his life with scripture, what it means to reckon honestly with those wounds, and how they may be tended. Chacour's wounds include the obvious ones—narratives of election and conquest deployed against him. But they also include the struggle to claim the Beatitudes as a source of agency and not passivity. These struggles arise not simply from his own interpretive errors, but from the entanglement with peoplehood at scripture's heart. In the course of this struggle, Chacour develops what Mark Calder has called a "scriptural *sumud*"— tending scripture with fortitude and persistent care amid difficulty.[561] I begin with a brief foray into contemporary Palestinian Christian reflections on the book of Joshua.

[561] Calder, *Bethlehem's Syriac Christians*, 6.

5.3.1 Chacour's wounds

Was Rahab a traitor? In the annual *Al Liqa'* Center's Contextual Theology Conference, during the 2009 war between Hamas and Israel, the Palestinian Greek Catholic theologian Geries Khoury suggested as much. Comparing the actions of Israel that year in Gaza with the conquests in the book of Joshua, he figured Palestinian collaborators as new Rahabs.[562] What made such a reading possible? Though not uniformly, Palestinian Christians have been alienated from their scriptures, even as they have been alienated from their land. What follows is a snapshot of that alienation in the contemporary moment.

Munther Isaac, a Lutheran pastor and theologian from Bethlehem, has summarized this alienation, and the drawbacks of various responses. "Modern Israel not only robbed us of our land and freedom, but it also robbed us of our scripture and spiritual heritage as Palestinian Christians," he writes.[563] But Isaac blames Palestinian theologians for inadequate responses to this challenge. "We read the OT *reacting* to Christian Zionism and the new challenges we faced after the *Nakba* and the creation of the modern State of Israel."[564] Isaac suggests that Palestinian readings of the conquest narratives have tended to accept the identification between biblical and modern Israel, labeling biblical Israel an oppressor in the mold of its contemporary national successor. Thus, "Palestinian Christians have developed a negative attitude toward the OT," he continues, arguing further that "Palestinian Christians have become Marcionites in both belief and practice."[565] Isaac echoes a common assertion, that in the wake of 1948 "references to 'Israel'

---

[562] *Al Liqa' Journal* 24:1 (2009) [Arabic]. Cited in Munther Isaac, "Reading the Old Testament in the Palestinian Church Today," in ed. Salim Munayer and Lisa Loden *The Land Cries Out: Theology of the Land in the Israel-Palestinian Conflict* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 226.
[563] Isaac, "Reading the Old Testament in the Palestinian Church Today," 228.
[564] Ibid., 221. Emphasis original.
[565] Ibid., 218-9.

and 'Zion' in the liturgy of the Palestinian church[es] were replaced by terms like 'people of God' or 'Jacob.'"[566]

Palestinian liberation theology is no doubt in Isaac's sights here. Of the book of Joshua, the Anglican theologian Naim Ateek maintains that "we do not tear up these pages from our Bible but neither should we read them in public worship."[567] Rather, for Ateek and some others, such texts should be used negatively as a contrast depiction of the conception of God that surpasses it. "Two distinct strands of religious thought run through the Old Testament. One is exclusive, offering us an ethnocentric (warrior) God…the other is an inclusive, universal God."[568] Evading charges of Marcionism, Ateek argues that later prophetic books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and above all Jonah describe an expanding view of the peoplehood of God. The book of Joshua is a witness, then, to what both Jesus and Jonah surpass. Jean Zaru, the Quaker Palestinian educator and activist, has articulated a similar alienation and interpretive response. Zaru describes how even the Exodus narrative is problematic for her now, because in the background of the story always lies its conclusion in displacement. "God will lead them into a 'land flowing with milk and honey.' But in addition to the milk and honey, the land had an abundance of people.'" [569] Even in the stories of deliverance from Egypt Zaru hears the anticipation of occupation because she cannot rehearse Exodus without hearing the voices of Jewish settlers appropriating more land and telling her that "God promised it to them in the Bible."[570]

---

[566] Ibid.
[567] Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*: *The Bible, Justice, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 48.
[568] Ibid., 81.
[569] Jean Zaru, *Occupied with Nonviolence: A Palestinian Woman Speaks* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 24.
[570] Zaru, *Occupied with Nonviolence,* 24.

If Isaac and others have argued against Palestinians simply identifying with biblical Canaanite peoples, it has been a natural connection to make, one that follows the contours of other national and ethnic self-identifications for Middle Eastern Christians. After all, "Philistia" and "Palestine"—clearly distinguishable cognates in English—are sometimes rendered identically in several contemporary Arabic Bible translations, or with the difference of a single letter. Thus, for example, the Hebrew word "*Peleshet* /פְּלֶשֶׁת" in Psalm 60:8 which is rendered "Philistia" in the NRSV, is translated "*Palestine* /فَلَسْطِينُ" in most contemporary Arabic Bibles. As in: "Moab is my washbasin; on Edom I hurl my shoe; over *Palestine* I shout in triumph."

For a number of prominent Palestinian writers, this potential sense of continuity with ancient Philistia is an asset in the national struggle. They hope history and notions of indigeneity will do for the Palestinian claim what scriptural warrant did for the Israeli claim. The Palestinian historian Nur Masalha, for example, dismisses the historicity of biblical conquest narratives and argues that contemporary evidence paints a picture of Israelite and Philistine coexistence to which modern Palestinians are the rightful historical heirs.[571]

However, other Palestinian Christian writers regard such a rhetorical identification with ancient Canaanites as an unwelcome intensification of the very alienation to which it responds. The Lutheran theologian Mitri Raheb frequently records his own frustrations at being categorized as the biblical "other." In a recent book, Raheb recalls taking part in a Christian-Jewish dialogue in Bethlehem. There, a German Reformed pastor announced how "how happy he was to be able to come from Germany to bring the children of Isaac and the children of Ishmael together after

[571]"The Palestinians are the indigenous people of Palestine" and "the legend of the 'Israelites' conquest of Cana'an and other master narratives of the Old Testament are myth-narratives designed to underpin false consciousness, not evidence-based history," Nur Masalha, *Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History* (London: Zed Books, 2018), 1, 3. Or further, "it would not be unreasonable to argue that the modern Palestinians are more likely to be the descendants of the ancient Philistines (and Israelites) than Ashkenazi Jews," 385.

thousand years of hostility."[572] These European observers "were in tears," Raheb recalls, understanding themselves to be "seeing salvation history unfold before their eyes." Raheb, though, was deeply disturbed that this reading—of Palestinian Christians as Ishmael and Jews as Isaac—erased his claim to continuity with the people of promise. (And who, he wondered, were the Europeans in that picture?) Raheb recalls another incident where an American Christian deeply sympathetic with Palestinian suffering wondered aloud to him "why Israel is not adhering to the Bible. God told them very clearly to 'take care of the strangers.'"[573] But Raheb emphatically did not see himself as a "stranger." Even by supposed friends "we are viewed as the Canaanites or as the descendents of Ishmael, which means that theologically we are inferior and politically, second-class citizens."[574]

Raheb experienced this loss of continuity within himself as well. He reports that while as a child the figures of the Old Testament had been spiritual heroes to him, after the 1967 war and study at a seminary in Germany, he could no longer read Joshua and David "in continuity with Jesus, as they used to be. They were instead placed into a kinship with Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir…The Bible I had heretofore considered to be 'for us' had suddenly become 'against us.'" And so, he concludes poignantly, "I started to hate this God."[575] Raheb's writing is an attempt to reverse this loss by positioning Palestinians, instead, as the people of promise who have endured countless empires and will endure the temporary jurisdiction of modern Israel.[576]

---

[572] Mitri Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible Through Palestinian Eyes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019) 36.
[573] Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire,* 37.
[574] Ibid., 38.
[575] Mitri Raheb, *I am a Palestinian Christian.,* 56.
[576] "The natives of the land have been made strangers in order to make room for an invented people to occupy the land." Ibid. For Raheb, Ashkenazi Jews are welcome to share the land in peace, but they have no legitimate historical claim to own it.

Elias Chacour, too, bears this same wound of alienation. As I have already narrated, in *Blood Brothers,* Chacour wrestles with the complexities of election and modern possession of the land. To frame the chapter entitled "Grafted In," he describes revisiting the ruins of his home village, Bir'im. Chacour describes how, on his father's reading of Romans 9-11, his family believed in Jewish and Christian (and Muslim) coexistence, developing Paul's metaphor of grafting to underline the hospitable intimacy between the two communities in Palestine. The pain of exile shatters this intimacy, for Chacour, a loss that spreads as well to his relation to his scriptures. This struggle to assert a partially lost intimacy with the figures of scripture comes most to the fore during Chacour's study in Paris. "I had been surprised at fellow seminarians and professors. They had often become furious in discussions when I had stated that Palestinians also had a God-given right to live in Israel, to sow and reap from the land, and to live as equals, not second-class citizens. Were we not 'children of the promise, regarded as Abraham's offspring?'"[577] Like Raheb and others,[578] Chacour's own sense of alienation was exacerbated by encounters with other Christians whose readings of scripture justified his displacement. Western education deepened their sense in which the Bible no longer recorded a family lineage.

But Chacour's narrative brings one other aspect of this alienation to light, one that is not so distinct to the Palestinian Christian experience. As we have seen, the Beatitudes were a source of difficulty for Chacour, a difficulty perhaps more important to resolve, for him, than texts about conquest and election. Recalling both his beating as a child by soldiers and the Melkite hierarchy's inaction, he recalls that "suddenly [the Beatitudes] were terribly disturbing. Why did

---

[577] Chacour, *Blood Brothers,* 145.
[578] Audeh Rantisi describes a similar alienation emerging at his otherwise positive experience at the Bible College at Wales at Swansea. *Blessed are the Peacemakers: A Palestinian Christian in the Occupied West Bank* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 53.

they sound so embarrassingly contradictory…if you tried to live in happiness and peace, wouldn't someone just kick you out of your home?" (101). Given the way the Sermon on the Mount is bound up with Chacour's experience of the mountains of Galilee, this was an alienation from land, and text, and peoplehood all at once. For it is at just this time that Chacour realizes in conversation with his closest friend that his "deepest wound" was "the need for a home, a sense of *place"* (108, emphasis original). His path—geographic and spiritual—was lost.

He records this dissatisfaction with the Beatitudes in later occasional writings as well. At a 2004 conference hosted by the Sabeel Liberation Theology Center he describes how "in the past…I was confused about how to read the Sermon on the Mount. How could I go to Gaza and read 'Blessed are you because you are hungry and thirsty for justice?' How could I go to Nablus and read 'Blessed are you because you want to become peace makers?' They would have no ears for me because they are convinced that they are not blessed. They have been cursed."[579] It is a confusion shared by Raheb and perhaps many others as well. Raheb writes that "I struggled with this text [the Sermon on the Mount] for many, many years."[580] After all, it seemed that "Jesus was mistaken because the meek are crushed."[581] For a time, at least, the promises of scripture seemed to have failed. Like Anna Jansz in my third chapter, Chacour, Raheb, and others struggled to read scripture in the wake of a loss that seemed to contradict their sense of the Bible's guarantees. How could the Bible once again be a book that called their people into a vocation of promise?

---

[579] Elias Chacour, "Fear No More," in Naim Ateek et al ed *Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics, and the Israel-Palestine Conflict* (London: Melisende Publishing, 2005), 245.
[580] Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire,* 97.
[581] Ibid., 98.

5.3.2 Scripture's wounds

In what sense do these wounds inhere in the text of scripture itself? For a number of contemporary commentators, texts like Joshua and even Exodus are inherently violent, carrying the seeds of ethnocentric conquest with them wherever they go; genocide in embryo. With respect to the contemporary Israel-Palestine conflict, Edward Said has done the most to inaugurate this line of thinking among contemporary figures with a 1986 review of Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution*—sparking publication of an acerbic follow-up exchange.[582] For Walzer, Exodus inaugurates worldly revolution and history understood as a linear movement that may be improved. For Said, Exodus represents the pernicious character of the doctrine of election—as he sees it, the idea that some are chosen and others may therefore be dispossessed. "Exodus," he says, "teaches that you cannot both 'belong' *and* concern yourself with Canaanites who do not belong."[583] For Said, to read Exodus and Joshua well is to read them from the Canaanite perspective.

The Native American literary scholar Robert Allen Warrior extended this argument to the North American context of settler-colonialism. In a brief but much cited 1989 essay, he argues that the Exodus narratives ultimately rely on a dream of conquest and ethnic cleansing of indigenous peoples. These texts cannot be a salutary resource for liberatory struggles. Warrior challenges not only postliberal but also liberationist recoveries of scripture.

> Whatever dangers we identify in the text, the god represented there will remain as long as the text remains. These dangers only grow as the emphasis upon catechetical (Lindbeck), narrative (Hauerwas), canonical (Childs), and Bible-centered base communities (Gutierrez) grows. The peasants of Solentiname [i.e. Ernesto Cardenal and

---

[582] See Michael Walzer and Edward Said, "An Exchange: 'Exodus and Revolution,'" *Grand Street,* 5/4 (Summer 1986).
[583] Edward Said, "Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution:* A Canaanite Reading," *Arab Studies Quarterly,* 8/3 (Summer 1986), 303.

> *The Gospel in Solentiname*] bring a wisdom and experience previously unknown to Christian theology, but I do not see what mechanism guarantees that they—or any other people who seek to be shaped and molded by reading the text—will differentiate between the liberating god and the god of conquest.[584]

For Warrior, Exodus and conquest are inseparable. Any attempt to build on this foundation will have genocide at its core. "As long as people believe in the Yahweh of deliverance, the world will not be safe from Yahweh the conqueror."[585] Many others have written on the unusability of these texts for liberative purposes but none with as much concentrated clarity as Warrior.[586]

Faced with such claims about a text's status as such, there is a deep pull among confessional biblical scholars and theologians to locate the problem, rather, in exegesis. The theologian and Anglican priest William Stalder has made this case regarding the problem of Palestinian readings of the Old Testament, arguing that the source of Palestinian alienation is their mode of reading. Instead of reading contextually or allegorically, Stalder suggests that Palestinian exegetical difficulties may be overcome by, in essence, a repristination of the historical-critical method. Palestinian Christians must *not* read "with the eyes of the 'Canaanite,' or 'Tradition,' or …from *any* extraneous perspective," and should instead "start with understanding the nature of hermeneutics and a given text in its own particular context."[587] For

---

[584] Robert Allen Warrior, "A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians" v R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* 3rd edition (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2006), 239.
[585] Robert Allen Warrior, "A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," 241.
[586] Mark Prior has added to Warrior's position with a thorough textual analysis of the themes of election and conquest in the Old Testament and their use in modern Zionism. His conclusion does not differ materially from Warrior's: "the Exodus-Eisodus motif is not a paradigm for liberation, but for colonial plunder. That is the plain sense of the biblical narrative, and the way the text has been used," for "the biblical claim of the divine promise of land is integrally linked with the claim of divine approval for the extermination of the indigenous people" and thus "the moral problem stems from the nature of some of the material of the Bible itself." Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 283, 286, 292.
[587] William Stalder, *Palestinian Christians and the Old Testament: History, Hermeneutics, and Ideology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2015), 243.

Stalder and others, the text of Joshua is hermeneutically unproblematic if approached with the correct historical-critical lens.

Ellen Davis takes a much more sensitive approach, reckoning with the historical weight of interpretations of Joshua. For Davis, the textual and historical details of Joshua urge an allegorical reading because of the way it departs from traditional ancient conquest narratives.[588] Joshua represents "an elaborate metaphorizing of the Assyrian threat of the seventh century" and its rhetorical force is to "engender resistance to religious assimilation."[589] Joshua thus "generates a long tradition of theological reflection on conquest, understood as a metaphor for spiritual triumph."[590] Thus, in a disarming move, Davis uses historical and textual arguments (typically thought to be at odds with allegorical readings) to place Joshua in a line of continuity with later allegorical readings of the text by Christian and Jewish figures like Origen and Philo of Alexandria. (For Philo, the entrance into the land is an "entry into philosophy."[591]) In addition, for Davis the lacunae in Joshua's narrative—paradigmatically in the story of Rahab—"fosters in attentive readers a questioning attitude toward ourselves…a subtle and probing critique of the violence of war, through its poignant characterizations of terrorized Canaanites and a divine warrior who refuses to take a side against the enemy."[592] Davis acknowledges the difficulty of the

---

[588] "Joshua breaks the literary mold, departing from the standard for of such conquest accounts in at least three respects: *rhetoric, scope of the claim to victory,* and *attitude toward the enemy."* Ellen Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 131. Emphasis original.
[589] Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures,* 138.
[590] Ibid., 140.
[591] *Quaestiones in Exodum* 2.13. Quoted in Katell Berthelot, "Philo of Alexandra and the Conquest of Canaan," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007), 40. Berthelot points out that while Philo engages in allegorical reading, he also develops other methods of dealing with the conquest narratives, including creative retellings and simple avoidance.
[592] Davis, *Opening Israel's Scriptures,* 139.

text but argues that, by metaphorizing war and sympathizing with the enemy, it preserves the "seeds of better readings."[593]

Davis' reading of Joshua is, for me, among the most compelling constructive accounts of the text. After all, if Joshua has been bound up in recent centuries with Western colonialism and conquest, it has also played a significant role in Christian reflection on individual and corporate struggle against sin, beginning not with Origen's commentary on the book but with the New Testament itself, including references in Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25. Misuse does not invalidate use.

In the Palestinian case, Joshua's flexibility has been rendered clear in Mark Calder's recent ethnography of Bethlehem's Syriac Christians. Calder's careful and attentive scholarship reframes the "problem" of the Old Testament and Palestinian Christians. Having entered into his ethnographic study intending to focus on this "problem," Calder quickly found that its texture varied dramatically according to denomination. Without denying the real pain of figures like Chacour (Eastern Catholic), Ateek (Anglican), Zaru (Quaker, with Greek Orthodox roots), or Raheb (Lutheran), Calder shows how, for the Syriac Orthodox Christians of Bethlehem, the Bible circulates within their liturgical life in a way that does not present the same difficulties. One of his Evangelical Palestinian interlocutors effectively summarized the difference between Syriac Orthodox and Protestant interpretive practices:

> When you interpret only, the text is away from you—you don't own it. When you chant it, you own it. From time to time I go to the Orthodox for a wedding or a funeral and

[593] Ibid., 141. For a similar argument, see Douglas Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010).

> when I saw them chant Psalm 91 they were with tears in their eyes. For them if it is about Israel, it is about them. The Old Testament is their text as much as the New.[594]

As Calder describes it, in their liturgical use, scripture becomes "the voice of the Syriac Orthodox community."[595] Without romanticizing the Syriac community in Bethlehem, Calder demonstrates that the difficulties of the Old Testament are not a uniform matter for all Palestinian Christians, but are bound up with specific practices of reading. "Texts," Calder argues, "need not be conceptualized as fixed points of reference in a discursive tradition, but part of the material of an affective, sensorial, and practical tradition…There is, in a sense, no text except a text-in-use."[596] This is not to hold to some infinite textual plasticity, but to insist that people only encounter texts *in use*.

I noted earlier that Chacour's sense of alienation increased during study in Paris, as with Raheb in Germany. Palestinian Christians who feel most alienated from biblical Israel tend to have the most exposure to Christian Zionism and also tend to have interpretive practices that are closer to Western practices of individual-centered text study (something we encountered in Henry Louis Gates's criticism of John Jea). "Texts," Calder writes, "are nothing without the materials, bodies, and social relations which conceive, write, read, perform, kiss, cite, and indeed, *interpret* them."[597] Chacour and others did not come up against Joshua's difficulty as such, but always through the text's embeddedness in ritual, relation, and land—in the Western theological academy, in public Jewish Israeli invocations, through a landscape with newly erected Hebrew place names, and so on. Palestinian Christians share some of this matrix, but not all.

---

[594] Mark Calder, "Researching Palestinian Christian Uses of the Bible," in Paul Rowe, John Dyck, and Jens Zimmerman, eds, *Christians and the Middle East Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 169.
[595] Calder, "Researching Palestinian Christian Uses of the Bible," 159.
[596] Ibid., 163.
[597] Calder's *Bethlehem's Syriac Christians,* 28. Emphasis original.

However, this is *not* to affirm that Palestinian Christian difficulties with scripture can be reduced to a matter of hermeneutical procedure, as William Stalder does. There is a curious mirror image in approaches that seek to convict or acquit the text for the crimes of modern colonialism. In both cases the issue at hand is the text's meaning as a stable, knowable quantity—as if the text's meaning exonerated it from its use, or particular uses determined its essential meaning. The issue is simultaneously easier and more difficult than either position will allow. Texts do not harm, in and of themselves, but only as they circulate in communities and practices of reading. A text cannot be intrinsically problematic (*pace* Robert Allen Warrior). That presumes a static and dehistoricized reader. But neither can difficult texts be rendered unproblematic by hermeneutics alone (*pace* William Stalder). That too presumes a static and dehistoricized reader.

The problem Chacour faces is not the meaning of a text as such. The problem he faces is the embeddedness of scripture in the lives of interlocking and overlapping peoples and places in which he participates: a ruined house in Bir'im preserved as decoration for an ancient synagogue; French Catholic theological authorities for whom the establishment of Israel constitutes a straightforward fulfillment of biblical prophecy; an Israeli state that will not give him a permit to build a high school in Ibillin; a Melkite hierarchy that cares more for its Lebanese than its Palestinian congregants; the stillness of the Mount of Beatitudes that witnesses to the grace and difficulty of Jesus' words.[598] His wounds are social and individual, hermeneutical and political, historical and geographic, all at once.

Elias Chacour would not find himself troubled by the Beatitudes in quite the same way if the texts in use around him circulated differently. If the Zionist project had not succeeded so well,

---

[598] Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, 138.

or if it had succeeded as a binational federation of communal associations, as the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber had hoped, Chacour would not be wounded in this way, for he would not have been displaced. Chacour could not choose that world, of course. He simply found himself in a world in which Joshua had been frozen into place as a text of colonial legitimation. In the year after the IDF seized Chacour's village, David Ben-Gurion announced, "Not a single biblical commentator, Jewish or Gentile, medieval or contemporary, would have been able to interpret the Book of Joshua in the way the Israel Defense Forces did this past year."[599] As Bruce Fisk has observed, the avowedly secular Ben-Gurion felt a special intimacy with Joshua, sweeping aside centuries of rabbinic commentary in favor of a direct sense of enactment. There had been, Ben-Gurion remarked in a personal correspondence in 1959, "a leap over the gap of centuries" in 1948.[600] Who could gainsay him?

I remarked above that attention to a text's circulation may render it both easier and more difficult than do approaches that center a text's static meaning. The ease should be obvious from Mark Calder's work on the Syriac Orthodox—the text may circulate in life-giving ways within a community even if alternative and painful readings abound around it. But by "more difficult" I meant this: no hermeneutical method—allegorical, contextual, historical critical—can erase Ben-Gurion's enactment of the text. Palestinian Christians cannot avoid the way Ben-Gurion and the

---

[599] Quoted in Anita Shapira, "Ben-Gurion and the Bible: The Forging of an Historical Narrative?" *Middle Eastern Studies* 33/4 (1997), 658. For an overview of the significance of Joshua for the founding generation of Israelis, see Rachel Havrelock, *The Joshua Generation: Israeli Occupation and the Bible* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

[600] Quoted in Bruce Fisk, "Canaanite Genocide and Palestinian Nakba in Conversation: A Postcolonial Exercise in Bi-Directional Hermeneutics," *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies* 18.1 (2019), 27.

IDF embodied the text. They are not without interpretive recourse,[601] but they cannot entirely avoid these wounds.

And neither may we. For while I think Joshua *ought* to be read as Origen and Philo did, it is readable otherwise, and our history of doing so now marks its use. Nationalism, I suggested in the first section of this chapter, arose in part through particular uses of the Bible. This was possible because scripture's wars and peoples could be traced onto other wars and peoples—John Smith and Hernán Cortés could figure Joshua; Pocahontas and La Malinche could be new Rahabs.[602] If Joshua may be read well as story of triumph over evil in which we may participate, its condition for doing so is also the possibility of its misuse as a text of conquest. Scripture's intimacy with us enables our transfiguration, by the Holy Spirit, as well as our malformation. To live well with it, in the meantime, requires reckoning with this history of wars and wounds.

5.3.3 Scriptural Sumud

The first word in the lexicon of Palestinian resistance to Israeli dispossession is *sumud*, or "steadfastness." It is a word that connotes neither armed opposition nor acquiescence, but determined maintenance in the land, enduring attachment to place and people—symbolized, above all else, by the olive tree. In 1984, the same year *Blood Brothers* was published, the Palestinian lawyer and writer Raja Shehadeh described the difficult balance of *sumud*:

> *Sumud* is watching your home turned into a prison. You, *Samid*, choose to stay in that prison, because it is your home, and because you fear that if you leave, your jailer will not allow you to return. Living like this, you must constantly resist the twin temptations

---

[601] That is to say, the charge of misinterpretation is a tool that cannot be discarded. As Michel Sabbah puts it, "if some manipulate the Sacred Scriptures, this is not a reason to abandon our faith in our Scriptures. On the contrary, it is not the Word of God but the manipulation that we must denounce and correct." Sabbah, "Reading the Bible in the Land of the Bible," section 36, page 41.

[602] For this comparison, see Laura Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth Through Native Eyes," in ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

> of either acquiescing in the jailer's plan in numb despair, or becoming crazed by consuming hatred for your jailer and yourself.[603]

Much of Chacour's educational work can be characterized as an expression of *sumud.* The main focus of Chacour's ministry was the construction of educational institutions, including libraries and community centers in various towns in the Galilee, and, most prominently a school and sometime college in Ibillin, Mar Elias Educational Institutions. Such work ought not to be seen as something entirely irrelevant to Palestinian Christian biblical interpretation. Rather, to make a flourishing life in the land amid the pressures of ongoing displacement and exile was to provide a living answer to the challenge that Palestinians did not belong to the land. It was to venture, in cement and trees and flesh, an affirmative answer to the question Chacour posed on the Mount of Beatitudes: *Were we not children of the promise?*

He resolved the question interpretively as well. He arrives at an answer in *Blood Brothers* just before his ordination. He discerns in the Beatitudes a vocation not of acquiescence, but of the recovery of dignity for a people. A few years later, he described this realization in linguistic terms that emphasized his ethnic connection with Jesus. Knowing that the Beatitudes could not be counsels of passivity, Chacour asserted that while the Greek *makarioi,* "blessed," connotes passivity, "when I look further back to Jesus' Aramaic, I find that the original word was *ashray,* from the verb *yashar"* which means "to set yourself on the right way."[604] Thus, "when I understand Jesus' words in the Aramaic, I translate like this: 'Get up, go ahead, do something, move, you who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for you shall be satisfied."[605] The intimacy of language, land, and history that Chacour felt with Jesus enabled a re-reading of the Beatitudes

---

[603] Raja Shehadeh, *Samed: Journal of a West Bank Palestinian* (New York: Adama Books, 1984), viii.
[604] Chacour, *We Belong to the Land,* 143.
[605] Ibid., 144.

that tended the wounds of alienation from land and text.[606] It is a reading shared with former Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah, who affirmed in a 1993 pastoral letter that the "meekness" and "gentleness" of Matthew 5:5 rightly bespeak "a love that neither yields rights nor abandons any brother or sister."[607]

Rehearsing this reading at a conference paper at Tantur in 1990, Chacour identified the Beatitudes with the ethos of the first *intifada* cresting just then. At that moment, he saw the nonviolent struggle for self-assertion as the core of both *intifada* and Palestinian Christian vocation: "the children of the Intifada did not kill."[608] But even then he shares a "hidden fear in my heart"—namely that in the birth of a Palestinian state, Palestinians might "forget the Intifada mentality and…follow the path of militarism and national or religious exclusivism" and thereby repeat "the sad lesson from the past half-century of Jewish history and empowerment."[609]

Chacour recognized that such an approach could, but for lack of power, become the mirror image of David Ben-Gurion's enactment of Joshua. "The meek will inherit the land" might become just another cry for exclusive possession. But Chacour insistently holds to a noncompetitive account of election that maintains the distinct calling of Jews even as it insists on a place for Christians and Muslims in the land. The way of living in the land is more important

---

[606] Mitri Raheb, too, articulates a similar recontextualization with one key difference. For Raheb, "we have been trained naively to connect Israel today with the Israel of the Bible, instead of connecting it to the…chain of occupying empires" that successively dominated Palestine for several thousand years. But if Palestinians adopt that longer view and think of Israel as a passing imperial power, and themselves as the people of the land, then Jesus' words ring truly and inspire faithful resistance. The meek will inherit the land of Palestine, in the long run. Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire,* 99. Raheb's reading succeeds in offering comfort, no doubt, and has in Raheb's own work inspired the same kind of institution building in Bethlehem that characterized Chacour's ministry. However, where Chacour's re-reading centers the agency of the oppressed in asserting peaceful coexistence ("Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," is a promise that the "true sons of Israel, whether of Jewish or Gentile origin" will live in the land together, for Chacour, *Blood Brothers,* 153), Raheb's functions primarily to construct a fixed category of the oppressor.
[607] Sabbah, "Reading the Bible in the Land of the Bible," 42.
[608] Elias Chacour, "A Palestinian Christian Challenge to the West" in Naim Ateek, et. al. ed. *Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices,* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 87.
[609] Ibid., 88.

than the question of ownership, and that way requires a hospitable intertwining of communities. When Chacour reads "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," he hears this as a promise that the "true sons of Israel, whether of Jewish or Gentile origin" would live in the land together, the one grafted onto the other without replacing it (153). The figure of a grafted fig tree—both Paul's and Chacour's father's—unites these various images.

Alain Epp Weaver describes this as Chacour's "arboreal imagination," a "theological mapping of the landscape of Israel-Palestine that does not negate but indeed affirms Jewish rootedness in the land."[610] For Chacour, the problem of the Beatitudes resolved into a vocation in which the downtrodden Palestinians could claim for themselves a dignified moral life even amid enduring injustice. The Beatitudes did not promise a static possession—of land or peoplehood. Rather, they promised a vocation of peaceful life to all who might take it up.

Fleshing out this sense of noncompetitive election, Chacour exhibits a trickster-like devotion to finding surprising resonances between Palestinians and *both* the elect and the non-elect in scripture. Whereas some Palestinian writers are eager to identify with non-Israelite figures and peoples (Edward Said), and others prefer to signal rightful and seemingly exclusive continuity with biblical Israel (Mitri Raheb), Chacour plays with both identifications. Chacour figures Palestinians as the elect Abel when he charges Jewish Israelis to listen to the "voices of *all* the dead" who cry out "'Cain, Cain, what have you done with your brother?'" (230). But unlike Raheb, he is happy to claim lineage from Ishmael, if this grants him status as a son of Abraham. "I too am a descendent of Abraham because I am a son of Ishmael," he told *Sojourners*

---

[610] Alain Epp Weaver, *Mapping Exile and Return*, 113.

magazine in 1980.[611] He is also happy to claim status as a descendent of those in the land before Abraham. While being detained by airport security in the 1990s, he told the security staff who were suspiciously interrogating him that "one of my forefathers was sitting under our fig tree in front of our house one day…Suddenly he saw down the path a poor stranger….that foreigner was *your* father Abraham, coming from Iraq, Mesopotamia, a Gentile among a Gentile nation."[612] Such claims are not to be taken entirely at face value. Chacour does not derive an essential identity from any one group—Canaanite, Israelite, or otherwise—nor would such identity count, in his theological imagination, toward an exclusive claim to ownership. Elsewhere, for example, he muses, "Am I a descendent of Abraham the Iraqi…or am I rather the one who received the errant Abraham?...Or am I rather the offspring of both?...Whoever I might be, I am deeply rooted in the soil of Palestine."[613] His rhetorical posture playfully troubles hard and fast claims about identity and ownership while asserting, without exclusivity, his own position as a member of a people whose roots intertwine with the land.

This barbed and comic interpretive sensibility emerges in Chacour's deployment of the history of biblical Israel in the land as well. Time and again he returns to the story of Naboth's vineyard in I Kings 21 as an allegory for contemporary Palestinian dispossession. This is an especially useful connection to draw because of its depiction of Israelite authorities acting with corruption and greed to seize land unlawfully, and its positioning of the Palestinians as members of Israel. Chacour relates that he first learned to make the connection from a Jewish professor he studied with at Hebrew University. He then recounts a meeting he had with then-Prime Minister

---

[611] Elias Chacour, interviewed by Jim Forest, "Children of Ishmael in the Promised Land." *Sojourners*, October 1980.
[612] Chacour, *We Belong to the Land,* 4.
[613] Chacour, "A Palestinian Christian Challenge to the West," 87.

Golda Meir when he stated, "Naboth, in the form of the people of Biram and Ikrit, is still alive, but his land has been taken.' I said directly to the prime minister, 'But it is not too late to correct the injustice.'" (89). Cast as Jezebel by implication, she replied "for state reasons we will never give them the right to return" (92). In this reading of the story, Palestinians and Israelis are *both* elect in the land, and must discern how to live well together.

Unlike Edward Said and others who at least at times rhetorically embrace a fixed correspondence between biblical Israel and the modern nation-state, and ancient Canaanites and modern-day Palestinians, Chacour plays with this dichotomy, figuring himself on both sides of the line. So eager was Edward Said to problematize Exodus that he suggested that "it is quite misleading" to refer to the Hebrews in Egypt "as an oppressed people," arguing that their situation would, comparatively, have been quite good, and thus that their story is "hardly comparable with that of American blacks or contemporary Latin Americans."[614] Such a refusal arises for Said because in his reading, the seams and complications in the narratives of Exodus and Joshua have disappeared, just as the space between the book of Joshua and the conquests of 1948 and 1967 have slammed shut. No alternative readings are possible: Exodus, Jewish migration from Europe to Palestine, Joshua, the slaughter of the Amalekites, the *Nakba,* and the exploits of the IDF all constitute one undifferentiated story. "There is no Israel without the conquest of Canaan and the expulsion or inferior status of Canaanites—then as now."[615] Such a predetermined reading militates against Said's better instincts, especially in his criticism of

---

[614] Edward Said, "Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution:* A Canaanite Reading," 292-3.
[615] Michael Walzer and Edward Said, "An Exchange: 'Exodus and Revolution,'" *Grand Street,* 5/4 (Summer 1986), 255. Edward Said's initial review essay prompted the publication of this acerbic interchange.

contemporary nationalism, including Palestinian nationalism.[616] But sadly, as the Native American literary scholar Laura Donaldson has pointed out, in this debate the dominant *colonizing* reading of Joshua remained intact for *both* parties; "both Walzer and Said uncritically accept its premises."[617] Both Walzer and Said accept at face value Ben-Gurion's literal and enacted reading of Joshua. The only choice, at that point, is to reject or defend the text whose only meaning is literal conquest. For Laura Donaldson, as for Chacour, these texts offer a much more complex space in which modern peoples may be figured. In her own response, she provides a reading of the slaughter of Hebrew children in Egypt in Exodus 1:8-13 alongside an account of the deaths of Native peoples at mission outposts in North America. Such "biblical mixing" can, she states, bypass "oppositional rhetoric" to "pierce the reader's heart."[618] To do so is a "risk," but it is a risk that "evokes the ancient Exodus promise of liberation."[619]

In sympathy with such readings, Chacour's reflections on election might be understood in the frame of what Mark Calder has called a Palestinian Christian "scriptural *sumud."* In reframing the significance of figures like Cain and Abel, Melchizedek, Abraham, Ishmael, Ahab, and Naboth, Chacour asserts his place as a member of the elect, "tilling" as Calder puts it, "the often unyielding soils of…sacred written inheritance" and ensuring that one-sided applications of biblical promises do not have the only word when it comes to the relevance of scripture for the

---

[616] See, for example, his reflections on the necessity of acknowledging the trauma of one's enemy at the end of "Invention, Memory, and Place," *Critical Inquiry,* 26/2 (Winter 2000) 192. Or his consistent support for a binational and pluralist society in Israel-Palestine, including his criticism of nationalism in "My Right of Return," interview with Ari Shavit, *Haaretz,* 2000, also published in Edward Said, *Power, Politics, and Culture* (New York, Pantheon Books, 2001).

[617] Laura Donaldson, "Joshua in America: On Cowboys, Canaanites, and Indians," in ed. Mark Vessey, *The Calling of the Nations: Exegesis, Ethnography, and Empire in a Biblical-Historic Present* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 276. "Said's refusal to acknowledge the possibility of Israelite oppression mimics Walzer's position in its obstinate misunderstanding. This mutual failure of empathy must surely preclude the emergence of any productive hermeneutic or political action." 283.

[618] Donaldson, "Joshua in America: On Cowboys, Canaanites, and Indians." 288.

[619] Ibid.

contemporary conflict.[620] Such references not only destabilize assumptions about the boundaries of election, asserting Chacour's place within an enlarged circle, they reframe the question of election entirely from a question of status to a dynamic of relation. In Naboth's vineyard, the question is not "who is elect?" but "how do people of promise live with each other?"

But if *sumud,* with its agricultural valences, is to be an analogy here, then it includes one other aspect: letting texts lie fallow. Chacour does little to engage Joshua, that most central of conquest narratives. In a passing moment during a speech later in life Chacour suggests that in seizing Jericho "Joshua…did evil in the name of God."[621] Perhaps deeper engagement with these texts would have enriched Chacour's scriptural *sumud.* Perhaps, too, a story must remain untilled for a time, to ensure that it may yet be fruitful later. This act too is guided by faithful hope.

In the wide extent of his cultivation of complex scriptural belonging, Chacour displayed a playful tenacity ordered toward love. There is good scriptural precedent for this tenacity, and for the complex and intertwined picture of election it provides. As Mari Jorstad puts it, in reflections on Joshua's lists of conquered territories, "home in the Bible sits on the edge between the loveliness of belonging and the horror of conquest."[622] In the same way, election in scripture traces the border between terror and blessing. The Lord marks Cain in both judgment and protection. Jacob's tenacious grip on Esau's heel turns so easily into possessive greed. But then, that same grip might become a brother's embrace after long sundering. The pain of Esau's cry—"Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me, me also, father!" (Genesis 27:38)—is inseparable from Jacob's exclamation to Esau, "to see your face is like seeing the face of God" (Genesis

---

[620] Calder, *Bethlehem's Syriac Christians,* 6.
[621] Elias Chacour, with Alain Michel, *Faith Beyond Despair: Building Hope in the Holy Land* (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2002, 2008), 23.
[622] Mari Jorstad, "Precious Portions," Presentation at the Society of Biblical Literature, San Antonio, 2021.

33:10)—an exclamation that itself only comes after Jacob's struggle with the stranger in the dark. There is terror, but by a tenacious grace it ends in blessing.

A poignant tenacity characterizes even Abraham in his debates with God over the fate of Ishmael and the people of Sodom. "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!" he implores the Lord in Genesis 17:18. In just the next chapter, when Abraham and Sarah are visited beside the oaks of Mamre and promised another son, the Lord wonders "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" and concludes "No, for I have chosen him." (18:17-19). But the first act of the renewed elect one is to plead for Sodom like a devious child. "Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city…Suppose forty are found…Suppose ten…" Abraham is possessed of a tenacity ordered to love. When the Gibeonites hear of Joshua's entry into Canaan, their persistent trickery saves their lives. Ruth and Rahab possess the same tenacity. So too does the Syro-Phoenician/Canaanite woman of Mark and Matthew, in one of the Gospel texts that has proven most vexing to contemporary readers. Accepting the hierarchy laid out before her, with fortitude and wit she nonetheless insists for a place for herself, and Jesus commends her. Or consider Jesus' many parables of persistence—the widow who will not stop petitioning the unjust judge (Luke 18-1-8), the neighbor who knocks on the door until he is answered (Luke 11:5-8). Time and again biblical pairs simultaneously judge human self-destructiveness and persevere for benediction.

No single reading exhausts the ache of these texts. But one way of thinking constructively about their function in scripture is through pedagogy and participation. When Abraham cries out "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!" we rightly cry with him. When the Syro-Phoenician woman and Jesus jointly induct their listeners into an enlarged sense of belonging, we may feel our loves enlarged. This is not to suggest that Christian scripture bends away from election, or eclipses God's promises to Abraham; it is rather to insist that election is

not a static state but a dynamic vocation of blessing. It is, in both Old and New Testaments, invitational. God enters human history, into its wars and its conquests, and chooses a people again and again to show forth divine righteousness. Such election cannot help but get caught up in human sin and entangled with domination from the days of Cain until now. And yet, God continues to empower human responses to this gracious invitation, from the days of Cain until now. Chacour's tenacity and fortitude joins him to this long and bloody history of grace.

5.4 Who is Israel? Peoplehood and the Spectre of Supersessionism

The Palestinian case exposes fundamental difficulties in living with portrayals of election, promise, and conquest in scripture. In the foregoing I have explored the nature of this challenge as well as Chacour's mode of living well with scripture in the meantime—interpretive *sumud.* In this final section I broaden my question to inquire about what it means to be formed well not as individuals but as a people, by scripture. Here I find no single interpretive criterion provides a safeguard against destructive nationalism. While affirming the importance of non-supersessionism as a necessary Christian reform, I argue that it cannot resolve the problems of modern nationalism. However, this does not mean scripture cannot be a source for the formation of peoples. Drawing on Chacour and other Palestinian Christian voices, I underline the necessity of flexible and dialectical figural readings of both Israel and its biblical neighbors. Gentile Christian peoples must be simultaneously Israel and Nineveh.

5.4.1 The limits and possibilities of flexible figuration

First, however, I begin this final section by returning to a different aspect of the Assyrian case I introduced in the first section. I do so to broaden and complicate the standard picture of the

relation between national identity and readings of biblical Israel. While the history of Western nationalism suggested a straightforward figural relation between biblical Israel and one's nation, scripture's role here has been quite diverse. Nations may be biblically figured in surprising and distinct ways. Consider the varied uses of scripture in the national self-consciousness of diasporic Africans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For the "Ethiopianism" of the period, for example, scriptural references to Nubia and Cush provided the foundation for a distinctive role for African-Americans—a way to make sense of present bondage and a ground for future hope. For Maria Stewart, an early African-American abolitionist, "poor, despised Africa was once the resort of sages and legislators of other nations" and had been brought low by "our gross sins and abominations," but, she insists, quoting Psalm 68:31, a touchstone of American Ethiopianism, "a promise is left us, 'Ethiopia shall again stretch forth her hands unto God.'"[623] Flexible identification with biblical Ethiopia—an identification that enabled rather than precluded identification with Israel as well—formed one ingredient in Black Atlantic diasporic national consciousness. This is simply to say that negotiating the relation between nationalism and scriptural hermeneutics is not reducible to identifying or not identifying with specific figures. The nature of such formation is far more complex, as the history of Black nationalism and its conception of nationhood within a nation—modeled on Israel—as a mode of resistance to white supremacy suggests.

To display this complexity, I return to Assyrian identity via an examination of the ancient and ongoing "Fast of Nineveh." Also known by the Syriac word *Ba'utha* or "supplication," this is an annual three-day fast observed a few weeks before Lent by the Assyrian Church of the East

---

[623] Stewart, Maria W. *An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall in Boston, Feb. 27, 1833*. Printed in *The Liberator*, Vol. 3, no. 17, 27 April 1833, 68.

and the Chaldean Catholic Church. The fast initially began, according to tradition, in the sixth century in northern Mesopotamia after an outbreak of plague. In daily masses spread over three days, participants liturgically re-enact Jonah's supplications from the belly of the whale *and* those of the Ninevites after his preaching. (I participated as a choir member in this re-enactment at a Chaldean Catholic Church in Iraq in 2015 and 2016.) The fast reinforces a linkage between ancient Assyrians and churchgoers like my friend Hormiz, with whom I began this chapter's first section. The prayers emphasize Jonah's repentance, but above all highlight the supplications of Nineveh as a model for all to follow. Amid the second day's prayers, the priest or deacon chants:

> Compared to their penitence, our own is more like a dream.
> Compared to their *Ba'utha,* ours is but a shadow here…
> The Ninevites poured out their hearts; let us end our jealousy.
> Nineveh freed all of its slaves; you, have mercy on the free.[624]

In the fast, congregants perform the book of Jonah and their own peoplehood at once.[625] It takes what might be a problematic identification—given the stark depravity of the Assyrians as portrayed in the Bible—and enables this identification to serve not as an impediment to the reading of scripture, but an avenue into its very heart.

But here, as always, is the risk of pride. "Who on earth," the prayers ask, "implored like this? Who else has humbled himself? Who else has bowed down so low?"[626] Much of these prayers, including the lines quoted above, come from the writings of the earlier fourth-century poet Ephrem the Syrian, especially his lengthy retelling of the book of Jonah in verse.[627] Ephrem

---

[624] "Ba'utha Prayers," Chaldean Catholic Diocese of St. Thomas the Apostle, USA. Translation by diocesan staff. 19. <https://chaldeanchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Bautha-Prayers-English.pdf>
[625] In the words of Derek Krueger (of Byzantine liturgy but *à propos* here), the fast "grafted the community onto the biblical events" providing "scripts for a saveable self. Krueger, *Liturgical Subjects: Christian Ritual, Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Selfhood in Byzantium* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 76, 220.
[626] "Ba'utha Prayers," 21.
[627] Ephrem the Syrian, *The Repentance of Nineveh*, translated by Henry Burgess (London, 1853), 8.

praises Nineveh as "a mirror to the world, in which justice might be viewed" and contrasts it with what had taken place in Israel by Jesus' day: "The fast in the midst of [Nineveh] was held in honor, but the holy temple in Zion they had made a den of robbers."[628] Ephrem relays an apocryphal epilogue that only heightens this comparison. In his retelling, some of the leaders of Nineveh begged Jonah to permit them to accompany him back to Israel, that they might learn more of the one true God. When Jonah refuses ("for he feared lest they should see the idolatry of his countrymen") some Ninevites nonetheless sneak along behind him.[629] They peer down from the mountains of the Jordan valley into the plain of Jericho and witness the idolatry of Israel and wonder, aghast, "is this the race of Abraham or are we looking upon devils?"[630] In Ephrem's hands, formation into penitent peoplehood could become a ritual of replacement. "Repentance has its own deformations," Lauren Winner writes, among them "the presumption that having repented, one can become cavalier."[631]

Ephrem and the cycle of the prayers of *Ba'utha* attend to these risks christologically. The Ninevite king who leads their repentance becomes, because of the enormity of his humility, a figure of Christ. In addition, by the end of the three days, the prayers turn from Jonah and Nineveh to the figure of the struggling human ("He fights a fight of sufferings at every hour"[632]). This figure is himself taken up in the figure of Christ ("Our own body, in glory, sits at your right hand…you have raised it to the name [of] divinity"[633]). The story of Nineveh's repentance is but a pathway into the greater human story of tribulation transformed by Christ's redemption.

---

[628] Ephrem, *The Repentance of Nineveh*," 102, 74.
[629] Ibid., 121.
[630] Ibid.
[631] Lauren Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, 157.
[632] Ephrem, *The Repentance of Nineveh*, 33.
[633] Ibid, 40.

This one example displays the range of possibilities in a people's relation to biblical Israel and its others. There is abundant space for peoples to take root in scripture, to find unexpected places that form a corporate identity in and through the figures of scripture, to map their travails and successes onto those of scriptural peoples. There is space, too, for our malformation precisely here. The intimacy between our world and the world of scripture allows for both. But the line between the two is difficult to discern, and impossible always to separate. How can Christians imagine their peoplehood well, via scripture? This is a question, in modern theology at least, that above all else centers on the issue of supersessionism.

5.4.2 The limits of non-supersessionism

For wide swaths of contemporary Christian theology—especially postliberal theology—supersessionism functions as the original sin of Christian thought and life. Its resolution, it would seem, promises a picture of peaceful peoplehood within the church and beyond. The reaction against supersessionism emerged in the decades after the Holocaust, as Christian theologians reckoned with the horrific toll of Christian anti-Judaism and anti-semitism. Here the Second Vatican Council marked a clear departure from hard supersessionism for Roman Catholics. *Nostra Aetate* declares that "although the Church is the new people of God, Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God" and this emphasis on the continuing validity of Judaism would only be strengthened in later encyclicals and apostolic exhortations.[634] Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide* stands out as a significant attempt to sort through the

[634]Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate.* October 28, 1965, section 4. See for example, Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* "We hold the Jewish people in special regard because their covenant with God has never been revoked, for "the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29)," 247.

issue.[635] This broader emphasis resonated among postliberal Protestant theologians near the close of the twentieth century. Though deemed partially supersessionist by the Jewish philosopher Peter Ochs, the writings of John Howard Yoder begin a pattern of locating the Jewish-Christian schism as a defining moment in which Christianity fell away from its truest vocation which for Yoder was diasporic pacifism, contrasted with Constantinianism.[636] Postliberal figures like Hans Frei and George Lindbeck articulated more clearly non-supersessionist approaches to the relation between Christians, Jews, and the covenant or covenants of God.

The issue has been taken up by a subsequent generation of theologians who share this sense of supersessionism as a kind of original sin, even if their diagnosis of its results have differed. For Willie Jennings and J. Kameron Carter, supersessionism paved the way for the racialization of Christianity in the modern period and the colonialism it accompanied. As Jennings puts it, "Christianity was ripe for this tragic collaboration with colonialism because it had learned before the colonial moment began to separate a language from a people. It had learned to value, cherish, and even love the language of Jewish people found in Scripture— but hate Jewish people."[637] For Jennings, any path out of the morass of the modern entanglements between Christianity and racism requires "remembering Gentile existence."[638] This is the truth supersessionism forgets: Jesus brings difference into communion without erasing it.

---

[635] Like many of her successors, the chief difficulty Ruether negotiates is the importance of maintaining claims about Jesus' messianic status without negating ongoing Jewish abilities to "go forward on earlier foundations." *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 249.
[636] "Christianity, since it was in the process of becoming non-Jewish, also became non-pacifist." John Howard Yoder, edited by Michael Cartwright and Peter Ochs, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 72. For reflections on John Howard Yoder as a "non-non-supersessionist" see Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation,* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2011) 127-165.
[637] Willie Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 37.
[638] Willie Jennings *The Christian Imagination*, 252. In his Acts commentary, Jennings articulates this further in his reflection on the interaction between Peter and Cornelius. "Jesus will draw Jew and Gentile together, not moving past the one to get to the other, not choosing one and rejecting the other, but precisely bringing together, drawing close what

These are salutary changes. They may, however, promise more repair than they can deliver. Susannah Ticciati has articulated one problem with contemporary approaches to non-supersessionism. She argues that Peter Ochs' criticism of Christian supersessionism suffers from the same problem he attacks: biblical Israel as a univocal signifier. That is, if the hermeneutical problem with supersessionism is that it always reads biblical Israel as the church and denies the synagogue's claim to an equivalent continuity, then many—though not all—contemporary approaches to non-supersessionism tend effectively to reverse this, reading biblical Israel always and only as the synagogue. This is a practical improvement, given the history of Christian anti-Judaism. But in the case of Israel-Palestine at least, insisting that Jews alone figure biblical Israel is no guarantee of justice.[639] Adopting one of Ochs' pragmatic terms, Ticciati argues that this gives up the crucial *vagueness* of scripture's figures, that is, their capacity for polyvalent signification. "To equate Israel with 'Jews' is prematurely to reduce the vagueness of Israel's story."[640] In light of Ticciati's critique, we might construe non-supersessionism thus: many may be Israel, Jews foremost. This approach to non-supersessionism thus rules in-bounds the ability of Elias Chacour and myriad others to read themselves as participants in biblical Israel while maintaining the claim of others—Jews most of all—to do so. If this is a normative claim about

---

was far apart. The meeting is the new order— Jew and Gentile will share in one Spirit." Jennings, *Acts,* 91. Consider also Jennings' insistence on a recovery of "gentile positionality" in his recent intervention in doctrines of creations. "Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21/4 (2019): 388-407.

[639] Palestinian Christian theologians frequently record frustration with accusations of supersessionism, arguing that it is a Western problem. "Why am I asked this?" Munther Isaac writes, "I am expected to arrange my thinking in a way to fit the paradigm of Western theology: a theology that came to solve a Western problem (antisemitism), with the purpose of dealing with the inner guilt—all at my expense." Munther Isaac, "Challenging the Empire: Theology of Justice in Palestine" in ed. Rafiq Khoury and Rainer Zimmer-Winkel, *Christian Theology in the Palestinian Context* (Berlin, AphorismA Verlag, 2019), 257.

[640] Ticciati, "Who is Israel?: Ochs, Barth, and Romans 9-11" in ed. Mark Randall James and Randi Rashkover *Signs of Salvation: A Festschrift for Peter Ochs* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021), 250.

Christian hermeneutics, it is also a descriptive one. Christians will not cease to read themselves in continuity with biblical Israel, and it is not clear how they would read the Hebrew Bible as scripture otherwise.

5.4.3 Inhabiting scriptural peoplehood

There is, then, no hermeneutical procedure to guarantee untroubled readings of election and peoplehood for Christian readers. But the case of Palestinian Christians offers some guidance for growth in wisdom. Three rules of thumb emerge.

First, one's people *is* Israel, by virtue of joining it in Christ. A people cannot sustain a relationship with scripture unless they understand scripture to be *for* them. That is, unless they understand its promises to be promises made to them. Palestinian Christians, even when they problematize biblical Israel, and even when they emphasize a kinship with Philistia or the Canaanites, still read themselves in continuity with the best of biblical Israelite religion. Part of Ephrem's failing, in his re-reading of the book of Jonah—emerging undoubtedly from fourth-century Jewish-Christian polemic—was his inability to see himself as a member of the Israel of Jonah's time (so much so that Jonah himself hardly appears to be an Israelite), such that their failures were not his own.[641] For Chacour, a much more wholehearted commitment to continuity with Israel emerges. Chacour recognizes his people as being "grafted on" to Israel in such a way that its stories, including its failures, have become his own. *Were we not children of the promise?*

Second, other peoples are *also* Israel, beginning with Jews. As Michel Sabbah has put it, when we turn to scripture "we are invited to read our own personal history and that of our

---

[641] Naim Ateek's reading of Jonah suffers from this same flaw. In *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation,* Jonah almost ceases to be a recognizably Israelite figure and becomes "the first Palestinian liberation theologian." *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation,* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008) 67-77.

people…But we are also invited to read the history of others, and above all, that of God."[642] The claim to exclusive Israelhood carries with it risks of domination. This is the difficult wisdom of Chacour's account of election. The temptation of some currents of—especially Protestant—Palestinian Christian theology is a move to read the Old Testament according to classical liberal supersessionism, where the God of Israel is a tribal, wrathful, provincial deity who gradually develops into the Father of Jesus Christ—from which vantage point we may turn and survey, with regret, the tribal past.[643] For classical liberal supersessionism of this sort, the true Israel is constituted by those who have passed beyond provincial exclusivisms into a more universal form of monotheism. Despite its rhetoric of inclusion, this too is another form of exclusive Israelhood. Better to remember simply that other peoples are Israel too, and Jews first of all. For Chacour, the affirmation that Jews and Christians both figure Israel is what makes possible a reading of the story of Naboth's vineyard in which all participants are members of Israel, called back into right relation with one another.

Finally, one's people is *not* Israel. Here is the most difficult part of Chacour's wisdom, and the one which emerges the least clearly. A people cannot be perennially outsiders to scripture and remain in dialogue with it. But, especially for the Gentile church (and especially for the churches of what was Christendom) regular reminders that *we* are outsiders are necessary. We were sinners and oppressors brought near to God's heart by adoption. "If," as Barth puts it, "the church desires to be altogether Moses…then it must recognize and ponder the fact that it is

---

[642] Sabbah, "Reading the Bible in the Land of the Bible," 24, *Faithful Witness,* 35.
[643] This is a critique ventured most forcefully by Amy-Jill Levine. However, her suggestion that Naim Ateek's "slippery" language about Jesus as a figure of Palestinian suffering is *intrinsically* antisemitic is vastly overdrawn and make it difficult to see how Palestinians could identify with Jesus at all. See *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 183-185.

Pharaoh."[644] In Chacour, we see this most clearly in his depiction of himself as enslaved to dreams of violent revenge, freed only by the "taming hand" of the Spirit that grafts him into the family of Israel. If the church desires to be altogether Nahum or altogether Jonah, then it must, with Hormiz and Ephrem, recognize and ponder the fact that it is also Sennacherib, King of Assyria. As I noted in my first chapter, Maximus the Confessor displays that dialectical sensibility in his reading of God's "destruction" of Nineveh in the book of Jonah. "God in truth both destroys and saves the same city: the former, by making it desist from its error; the latter, by bringing about its acquisition of true knowledge."[645] Nineveh is truly destroyed and truly saved and grafted onto Israel, in Christ.

These figural relations constitute Christian peoplehood. The political philosopher Sheldon Wolin once wrote on the distinction between "tending" and "intending" a constitution.[646] What I outline above are not blueprints a people might "intend." They are not procedures to secure an untroubled identity. They are, rather, tools by which a peoplehood might be "tended"—rules of thumb to be applied according to practical wisdom that attends to the needs of the moment. Does a people need to be reminded that it is Israel? Does it require instruction in the Israelhood of others? Or ought it rather be recalled to its status as the Nineveh God destroys? The question for Christians is not whether we shall read ourselves as Israel or Israel's others, but how and when to do each well.

Another way to think of these figural relations is in terms of blood and circulation.[647] During *Ba'utha*, Hormiz and other congregants are Jonah at one moment and Ninevites in the

---

[644] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 353.
[645] Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture*, 509.
[646] Sheldon Wolin, *The Presence of the Past* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), 81-90.
[647] Here I am inspired by Eugene Rogers' recent reflections in *Blood Theology*.

next. These relations circulate. For Christians, Christ is the beating heart from which the figures and the figured are sent and to which they are recalled. Nationalism tends to desiccate and solidify such relations. One perennial way in which readings of scripture go wrong is by making exclusive and final claims to the fulfillment of a scriptural figure. Such claims frequently trap not only their victims, but their enactors, who face stasis as the flow of relation ceases and the circulation of figures comes to a standstill. For Ben-Gurion, the IDF "interpreted" Joshua better than any rabbinic commentary ever had. Three-quarters of a century on, this declaration sounds less like the freedom he envisioned it as, and more like a never-ending-nightmare. In terms of political economy, such stasis describes the current Israeli system of *hafrada*, or "separation," epitomized by Ehud Barak's 2001 campaign slogan—"Us here. Them there."—and realized materially through the creation of its separation walls and roads that link settlements in the West Bank with Israel while ghettoizing Palestinian towns.[648] The hermeneutical counterpart of such stasis is an endless repetition of the book of Joshua. As Rachel Havrelock has recently put it, "acts of settlement" undertaken in this framework today "fuse the landscape described in Joshua with the contemporary West Bank" and even the Palestinian leadership finds it difficult to escape the "conquest paradigm" as it reads the historical and religious significance of the conflict.[649] The blood of figural relations has ceased to circulate.

Such stasis militates not only against historic Christian and Jewish reading practices, but scriptural patterns of internal reference as well. If, for rabbinic commentary, scripture circulates within itself, such that Exodus must interpret Song of Songs and vice-versa, for nationalist readings of any stripe there is a direct correspondence between text and enactment, crowding out

---

[648] For more on *hafrada* as an Israeli political doctrine, see Epp Weaver, *Inhabiting the Land,* 100-103.
[649] Havrelock, *The Joshua Generation,* 174-175.

not only other readers, but complementary figural relations within scripture. If 1948 is an enactment of Joshua, what are we to make of the rest of the story that follows—the disintegration of unified Israel, civil war, foreign conquest, exile, and return? If 1948 is Joshua, are we not led to expect another exile? If biblical interpretation is nothing more than the constant and permanent assigning of figural parts, then the Bible is always an inescapable tragedy. That is precisely the recognition displayed in the 1949 Haggadah written and recited by the settler at Kibbutz Sasa with which I began this chapter. *What gives us the right to reap the fruits of trees we have not planted?*[650] These words reveal the texture of real, tortured moral reflection, but the conflict and the settler's place in it has left little room for a circulation of figures and an affirmation of agency. There is one story and it is set. The fruit will be reaped, for generations.

In contrast, Chacour demonstrates a crucial feature not only of Jewish and Christian reading practices, but scripture itself: these relations circulate. Many may be Joshua. For Christians, Jesus is Joshua most of all, and us in him. In Chacour's life, Naboth, Abraham, and the Beatitudes were freed from their stasis to circulate. Forms of peoplehood can even enhance this circulation as well. To be Assyrian may be to find oneself trapped in the difficulties of the Bible's condemnations of Nineveh. It may also, with the rhythms of *Ba'utha*, be to find new meaning in the penitence of the Ninevite king and find in that penitence an intensity brought to fullness in Christ, and us in him. These relations move.

The Palestinian Christian example has one more piece of wisdom to impart to guide the practice of this sort of figural circulation (one which allows me to speak without embarrassment, as a critic of Constantinianism and amid secular modernity, of "a Christian people"). That is, their

---

[650] Beit-Hallahmi, *Original Sins: Reflections on the History of Zionism and Israel,* 161.

plural, multilayered, and consociational peoplehood. Palestinian Christians participate in a broader Palestinian peoplehood *not* configured exclusively as Christian, but they do so with explicit Christian readings of peoplehood. Aware of their minority status, Palestinian Christians assert a plural Palestinian peoplehood, flexible in religious identification, even as this conception faces challenges from Islamist conceptions that would insist on a Muslim uniformity, or at least supremacy.

Here even the language of "identity" is a hindrance, since, despite the increasing popularity of intersectional frameworks, it predisposes us to think of confessional association or gender or national citizenship as discrete predicates that inhere, additively, in an individual. On this view, I am a Mennonite *and* a man *and* an American. And perhaps, indeed, some Palestinian Christians would assert themselves as simultaneously Christian and Palestinian in that sense. But it is not that Elias Chacour is a child of Bir'im who happens to be a Greek Catholic and a Palestinian and an Israeli citizen. Rather, *because* he is a Greek Catholic child of Bir'im, he is a Palestinian (with citizenship in Israel). His confessional association, embedded in a geographical history, inducts him (by virtue of the *Nakba*) into participation in a broader Palestinian peoplehood. (Just as his status as a man is not incidental to his status as a priest; rather, that maleness inducts him into an ecclesiastical hierarchy with its attendant power to manage institutions and access vulnerable congregants.) As Mark Calder puts it in his study of Bethlehem's Syriac Orthodox community, "being *siryani* [Syrian Orthodox]…makes it possible fully to belong in Palestine and in Bethlehem."[651] Insofar as this is true, Palestinian peoplehood is not premised on a uniform identity, but is rather an "organic heterogeneity," to borrow Jacques

---

[651] Calder, *Bethlehem's Syriac Christians,* 287.

Maritain's phrase, of multilayered relationships between religious, tribal, geographic and other associations, united by a common experience of dispossession between the Jordan and the Mediterranean.[652] Palestinian Christians thus represent Luke Bretherton's account of the church's role in politics understood consociationally. These churches are, "distinct from and yet also a constituent element of the consociational body politic," both disciplining and being disciplined by the other publics (including other churches) with which they intertwine.[653] Such a consociational notion of peoplehood is all the more necessary for a people as legally and geographically fragmented as the Palestinians.

Within this broader Palestinian people, Christians make up a distinctive part that leavens and flavors the whole. In a homily given in Jerusalem on "The Mystery of the Palestinian Christian Vocation" on Pentecost in 2003, Michael Sabbah declared that "difficult witnessing remains our vocation."[654] It is a vocation to, as he put it later, "be small in this land"—a constant struggle to be "good salt, useful leaven…and a redemption that is fulfilled, day by day, in the mystery of God."[655] This vocation is not different in quality or character from Christian vocation generally; it is the calling of witness. But it is witness in relation to the Holy Land and its peoples.[656] Indeed, the land itself is a partner in that witness. For the 4th century theologian Cyril of Jerusalem, the wind, hills, and plants of Palestine "bear Him witness," by their quiet

---

[652] Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom,* trans. Joseph Evans (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1968), 163. Quoted in Luke Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life,* 169.
[653] No Palestinian has articulated the bittersweet intimacy with the places of Palestine better than Raja Shehadeh, who at one point remarks, "you treacherous hills…this land is going to soak up our blood for generations to come—and I hate it for that." Shehadeh, *Samed: Journal of a West Bank Palestinian,* 124.
[653] Bretherton, *Christ and the Common Life,* 185. I am indebted to Bretherton's account of peoplehood as membership in an "intricate, differentiated, intercommunal, or 'consociational' body." 113.
[654] Sabbah, "The Mystery of the Palestinian Christian Vocation," homily at the Benedictine Abbey Hagia Maria Sion, Pentecost Sunday, June 8, 2003, in *Faithful Witness,* 166.
[655] Sabbah, *Faithful Presence,* 175.
[656] Here, see Mitri Raheb's account of the land as a "fifth gospel," and its people as a "sixth gospel." *Faith in the Face of Empire,* 97.

endurance. "Jordan is his witness among the rivers, the sea of Tiberias among seas."[657] As we have seen, the land played an integral role in Chacour's sense of his own emerging witness and its relation to those of his ancestors. "My ancestors were the first to hear the Sermon the Mount and to accompany the Lord from one peak to another during his life…Since then, we are crucified with him."[658]

Such a model of peoplehood shares the complexity of the Pentecost narrative. In my second chapter's reflections on language I noted how some commentators viewed Babel as a kind of wound. If it is a wound, Pentecost does not reverse it, but enables difference to bless rather than embitter. At Pentecost, the Spirit multiplies the gift of speech for the nations. And yet this "movement from near to distant neighbors," as Barth observes, "takes place as such wholly within the sphere of Israel."[659] The crowd in Acts 2 comes from "devout Jews from every nation" (2:5). Here, *within* Israel itself, the multiplicity of the nations is figured and the vocation of blessing confirmed: to be "Israel among other peoples."[660] Here, as Willie Jennings notes, was "a community broken open by the sheer act of God" so that peoples might be joined together.[661] At Pentecost, Israel among the nations finds its vocation in blessing. Such blessing splits and shatters into many peoples, proliferating benediction.

This model of complex, geographically embedded and multilayered peoplehood has much to offer Christians everywhere as they navigate the pitfalls of modern nationalism. It provides a vision of cooperative Christian co-existence with other peoples in shared local, national, and non-

---

[657] Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures 10*.19 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, translated by Edwin Hamilton Gifford (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894).
[658] Chacour, "A Palestinian Christian Challenge to the West," in *Faith and the Intifada*, 87.
[659] Barth, *CD* III/3, 322.
[660] Ibid., 323.
[661] Jennings, *Acts*, 34.

state pursuits while maintaining Christian vocation and distinctiveness. If nationalism's craving for lonely homogeneity is a disease, then one remedy is a renewed sense of peoplehood as layered membership in complex and interlocking wholes. The alternative to a scripture-soaked nationalism cannot be a denial of peoplehood, but its proper pursuit.

Conclusion:

> *They shall build houses and inhabit them;*
> *they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.*
> *They shall not build and another inhabit;*
> *they shall not plant and another eat.*
>
> —Isaiah 65:22-23

Today in Kibbutz Sasa they build houses and inhabit them. This is a great good. Today in Kibbutz Sasa they also build vehicle armor used by militaries and police in Hebron, Fallujah, São Paolo, and elsewhere.[662] Meanwhile in Bir'im, weeds cover the destroyed family home of Elias Chacour. His favorite fig tree survives, at least at his last visit, though now its grafted branches grow wild and untended.[663]

When Isaiah receives a vision of the new covenant and new creation, he sees a future in which such grim division between peoples ordained to mastery and submission has passed away. *They shall not build and another inhabit.* Whatever Joshua's blessing of Israelite settlement may signify, it should no longer mean—after Isaiah and exile, after *Shoah* and *Nakba*—that the dwellings of some must for scriptural reasons be consigned to others. Peoplehood in scripture traces the border between terror and blessing, but God orders it finally toward blessing.

---

[662] Kibbutz Sasa collectively owns Plasan, a major supplier of vehicle armor for the Israeli and U.S. militaries and police, among others.. For an account of the shifting profile of the company after the end of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, on which it was heavily dependent for profit, see Ora Coren, "Israeli Company, Hurt by U.S. Troop Withdrawal From Iraq, Pivots and Returns to Profit," *Haaretz*, May 19, 2017. < https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/business/israeli-company-hurt-by-u-s-troop-withdrawal-from-iraq-returns-to-profit-1.5474199>

[663] Chacour, *Blood Brothers,* 144.

In Elias Chacour and the witness of Palestinian Christians we see how scripture, entangled with nationalism, may become a source of wounds. But scripture may also be tended in the wake of hermeneutical rupture. For Chacour, the Bible entwines with the land to form the possibility of a Palestinian Christian peoplehood that both inherits the promises of Israel without excluding Jews, and also names itself as Israel's other. This complexly figured peoplehood renews the scriptural grafting that had been torn asunder by the *Nakba.* It is not the denial of election but its embrace that enables scripture to form peoples well in the wake of nationalism.

~

As in the cases of Anna Jansz and John Jea in this chapter, Elias Chacour models interpretive fortitude in his individual response, a scriptural *sumud* that asserts rightful inheritance of the text and struggles to inhabit it well alongside others. Such a struggle is never fully realized before the eschaton. Like the Israelites after Joshua, who seem to have conquered and yet find the land still full of enemies, the attempt to find good news in painful texts extends always a little further over our temporal horizon. Origen once wrote of Joshua that Christ "teaches us peace from this very reading of wars."[664] To learn such peace is not, in the end, to alight on a proper reading; it is to venture a life.

In the final chapter, then, I apply my findings to broader non-confessional conversations about reading morally tarnished literature, showing how these insights pertain outside specifically Christian settings. I conclude by reflecting on the diversity of scriptural wounds my case studies have pointed towards and return to the theme of participation and embodied enactment as the heart of what it means to read scripture well.

---

[664] Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, trans. Barbara Bruce (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 14.1.

Chapter 6

Biography as Hermeneutics: Or, You Cannot Tend a Wound in General

"The world of L'Arche is gentle," wrote Stanley Hauerwas several years ago.[665] For Hauerwas, these mixed communities of the disabled and non-disabled living together in mutual care exemplify his argument that the church is, rather than has, a social ethic. If the L'Arche founded by Jean Vanier exemplified the practical and embodied aspect of Hauerwas' argument for a recovery of the church's social witness, the Christological pacifism of John Howard Yoder was its conceptual heart. But Vanier and Yoder can be moral exemplars no more. Over the past decade, the full extent of Yoder's abusive practices has been brought to light. And just two years ago the L'Arche Foundation revealed its internal investigation into the abuses of its founder. Jean Vanier abused at least six women through the course of his ministry.[666] The two cases are different, for L'Arche is not Vanier and its gentleness does not depend upon his character, while Yoder's abuse is harder to disentangle from his work. But—and this question should plague not only those who have been influenced by Hauerwas—what can it mean to call for a recovery of the social witness of the church, when one's exemplars turn out to be so destructively flawed?

Prudence and justice require the selection of better exemplars. But no human sources of moral formation lack flaw. Amid moral crisis, what does one do when the sources of moral formation and repair are themselves implicated in the problem? This is a question that for

---

[665] Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 77.
[666] Julie Zauzmer Weil, "Jean Vanier, Once Seen As a Noble Or Sainthood Candidate, Now Accused of Abusive Sexual Relationships," *Washington Post,* February 24, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/02/23/jean-vanier-once-talked-about-nobel-or-sainthood-candidate-is-accused-abusive-sexual-relationships-with-six-women/>

Christians—and in parallel ways Muslims and Jews—centers above all on their sacred texts and the way they become bound up with various ills. Christians have no access to revelation itself, except through finite and fallen teachers and histories.

This problem extends beyond the confines of traditions of theological reading to any community—religious or not—that seeks to engage with a body of texts over time. How does a committed Marxist understand the "dictatorship of the proletariat" truthfully and hopefully after Stalin and the gulag? What does it mean for a biologist to champion Darwin's writings in light of Social Darwinism? Is Aristotle of any use, given his justifications for patriarchy and "natural" slavery? How could Frederick Douglass read the U.S. Constitution not only with searing criticism but also pragmatic charity, knowing that it was a document conceived in and for slavery?

In this concluding chapter, I draw together the themes of the three case studies that have formed the center of this present work and set them within this larger context. First I turn to contemporary debates about tainted canons, both confessional and secular, and situate the findings of my project in relation to them. Then I return to my case studies and a provide a typology of the kinds of wounds and ways of tending that Jansz, Jea, and Chacour have demonstrated. Finally, I conclude with a philosophical and theological argument for the centrality of embodied enactment in response to flawed sources of moral formation.

Canons, moral formation, and embodied judgment

In this section I first connect the sorts of wounds my case studies exemplified to broader debates about how to relate to tainted canons (which is to say, all of them), theological or otherwise. I then turn back to contemporary reparative approaches to theological reading to discern why it is that biography is a fitting and underutilized genre in which to explore

hermeneutical responses to scriptural problems. Attention to procedures of interpretation alone is necessary but insufficient to the task of living with morally significant textual difficulties and the ways that plain-sense readings of them justify or set in motion brutal histories.

Debates about the nature of moral formation with respect to texts are not unique to Christian theology. The notion that certain canons of literature form the moral sense and political agency of their readers has found purchase in many human cultures. Until the collapse of the Qing dynasty ended the Chinese imperial civil service exam in the early twentieth century, a knowledge of Confucius and other classical literature was thought to be an indispensable aspect of moral, political, and literary preparation for public service. Beginning with the Quran, canons of Arabic literature played a similar role in various Islamic states. Indeed in Arabic *adab* means both "literature" and "etiquette" or "morals." Similarly, the ancient Greek notion of *paidea* held that reading the Greek classics was necessary for the ideal citizen of the *polis.* The Romans expanded this notion into *humanitas.* Education in Roman and Greek texts was supposed to form young men for public service in the organs of republican and imperial power. This last is the basis for contemporary notions of an education in the "humanities" and "liberal arts" in the English-speaking world.[667]

What I have investigated in this present work is how people may proceed when the textual tools of moral formation available to them are themselves bound up with moral deficiencies and malformations, and none of these canons are exceptions. From imperial China and Rome to the Abbasid caliphate and contemporary Western education, each of these canonical traditions of moral formation is intimately related to the maintenance of aristocracy and the

---

[667] The *bildung* tradition in Germany may be compared to this as well. For more, see Jennifer A. Herdt, *Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

repressive exercise of state power. One of the chief ideological justifications for Western imperialism and colonialism was the mission to "civilize" non-Western nations, not least through induction into the canon of Western literature with the Bible at its heart. And so, in the wake of decolonization after World War II, canons have fallen out of favor.

As literary theory turned toward deconstruction in the second half of the twentieth century, it became harder and harder to embrace the morally formative power of a given text, when its problems were so obvious. How could these texts form their readers well when they were themselves enmeshed in the modes of domination from which readers sought release? Of what use was Jane Austen, when she could not acknowledge the slavery upon which her worlds of polite manners were built?[668] Why read Dostoevsky if antisemitism animates his corpus?[669] But what has resulted, in literary deconstruction, has been a dead end of endless unmasking. Yes the texts are implicated in systems of domination. What then shall we *do*?

Canons were opened and a more diverse range of authors included. This is a welcome change, certainly. But it risks avoiding rather than attending to the central problem at hand. Some texts must be jettisoned, certainly, and some added or the list reconstituted altogether—these are questions of prudence for institutions and communities to resolve. But no author is blameless, no text harmless. And so the question that undergirds all these more specific ones, is this: how can readers entrust themselves, morally, to the texts they read?

---

[668] According to Edward Said's influential account, "Austen, and indeed, pre-imperialist novels generally, will appear to be more implicated in the rationale for imperialist expansion that at first sight they have been." *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), 100. For a sensitive and historically informed rebuttal, see Morson Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 295-346.

[669] For a sensitive engagement with this issue, see Gary Saul Morson, "Dostoevsky's Anti-Semitism and the Critics: A Review Article," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 27/3 (Autumn 1983): 302-31.

Feminist theorists and theologians have produced the most striking and constructive reflections on this issue. Among theorists, Eve Sedgwick, Rita Felski, Toril Moi, and others have all sought to re-situate the role of critique in reading classic texts. For the queer theorist Eve Sedgwick, "paranoid" reading and "reparative" reading describe not incommensurable literary approaches, but modes and perhaps moods that combine together at different times for ordinary readers. "Paranoid" reading (deconstructive reading), "places its faith in exposure," hoping that by uncovering systems of oppression in cultural artifacts, those systems may be undone.[670] Such work is necessary but not sufficient. It must be paired, she argued, with reparative forms of reading that "assemble and confer plenitude" after having uncovered and taken apart.[671] Rather than competing theories, it is better to understand paranoid and reparative reading as moments, postures, or modes of relation. Rita Felski has lodged similar complaints about literary critique, arguing that it has self-destructively consumed other modes of reading that it in fact requires in order to be useful.[672] For each of these theorists, literature can have a transformative moral effect. Each acknowledge the way the texts of a given canon are embedded in forms of domination. Each maintains the need for deconstructive approaches in order to uncover wrongs, while also holding that reparative approaches are necessary in order to create and sustain relationship. In short, the point of reading—in a moral sense—is not principally to come to some kind of moral judgement about the text's status, but to engage in dynamic moral relation. That relation is not procedural

---

[670] Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 130.
[671] Sedgewick, *Touching Feeling,* 149.
[672] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique,* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

and universal but rather ongoing and differentiated.[673] Deconstruction can find its useful place when it recognizes itself as a single mode within a broader practice of reading that requires attention, care, and modulated judgment oriented toward a dynamic relation between reader and text.

Feminist Christian theologians, meanwhile, have defined the theological character of that dynamic relation. Rachel Muers has argued that the burdens of feminist engagement with patriarchal and sexist theological tradition are an ongoing challenge to be explored in a life, not a once-for-all judgment. "The binary alternative—condemn the past or exonerate the past—is not a particularly fruitful one for the ongoing project of Christian theology."[674] Muers calls the alternative she outlines a "restorative justice of tradition." This includes "'full disclosure of the wrong'"—that is, acknowledging the damage certain theological texts have done and continue to do.[675] Such work actively uncovers and critiques wrongs but does not end there. It must include above all a sense of ongoing relation. For, "doing Christian theology means being in some kind of lived relationship of responsibility to the dead."[676] By acknowledging real harm, Muers suggests that readers may be able to "reread" any given author "as a fellow participant in hope—as someone whose work might…witness to God's promise of shalom…this kind of rereading is perhaps the closest we can come to the crucial step of forgiveness."[677]

However, Muers by no means insists on this "restorative justice of tradition" as something required of all Christian texts and readers. In the name of justice and care, some texts

---

[673] See Toril Moi's treatment of intersectionality in *The Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). 93-110.
[674] Rachel Muers, "Doing Traditions Justice," in Jenny Daggers ed. *Gendering Christian Ethics,* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 10.
[675] Rachel Muers, "Doing Traditions Justice," in *Gendering Christian Ethics,* 14
[676] Ibid., 11.
[677] Ibid., 18.

must be held at arms-length or set aside permanently. Such distance will always be necessary for some texts and some readers at some time. Karen Guth has demonstrated such variegated analysis in her work on specific theologians whose lives have tainted their legacies.[678] I would argue that for Mennonite theologians at least, a trial separation with Yoder is in order, to establish whether the fruits of his writing are necessarily tied to his work, or may be found elsewhere. Perhaps we will find that we do not need his words going forward.

Scripture is a different matter. To be sure, the same sort of prudential judgements are necessary. Here I recall Howard Thurman's grandmother, cited in Chapter 4, and her insistence on avoiding most of the writings of Paul. Or consider Chacour's reluctance to engage with the book of Joshua. It is a central task of the church to discern how and through which scriptures the Spirit is currently speaking, and this task requires discerning which scriptures ought *not* be spoken at certain times and places. But with Anna Jansz I take it that the authority of scripture is such that even if some may settle on a period of temporary separation from certain words, we must hold out a hope that the Spirit will yet speak through all the canon of scripture, even if we cannot presently see how. Indeed I argued that Jansz's life demonstrated the necessity of such hope for the development of wisdom in discerning when and how to speak the words of scripture. Viewed in this way, the prudential deferment of public use of certain texts could be an act of hope that the Spirit will renew text and community alike for new readings after a fallow season.

What these feminist readings demonstrate is that judgements about the usability of a text—both scriptural and otherwise—must be far more fine-grained than is often assumed. As Ashleigh Elser observes, moments of charitable reading and suspicious reading apply not merely

---

[678] Karen Guth, "Moral Injury, Feminist and Womanist Ethics, and Tainted Legacies," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38/1 (Spring 2018): 167-186.

to different texts and at different times, but within a single text. We may not only alternate between reading texts critically and charitably, as it were, but also exercise criticism and charity toward figures in the same text. Seen in this way, reparative charity and suspicious deconstruction are not so much competing theoretical systems as practical judgements about who deserves each, and when. Such suspicions and charities apply not simply to certain characters in a text, but certain passages within texts of a single author. Convinced as I am that "when Christ disarmed Peter he disarmed every Christian," I read Paul charitably, as it were, when in Romans 12:17 he counsels, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil." I read him suspiciously just a few lines later when he describes the divine ordination of the violence of the magistrate. Or perhaps it would be better—since I think my reading perfectly serviceable—to say that I read Romans 13 with my suspicions of Luther in mind. This kind of charity and suspicion is often self-serving. But such modulations are necessary if we seek to render ambiguous texts into living and coherent voices with whom we may engage in dynamic relation. Suspicion needs charity, and vice versa, precisely in order to enable truly charitable relations with a text. As Elser puts it, we read "suspiciously to sustain certain interpretive charities" and we read "charitably to fend off suspicions."[679]

Taken together, the disparate work of Sedgwick, Muers, Elser, and others suggests that the task of living well with a difficult text is not a work of once-for-all judgment to be accomplished and set aside. We ought not think we can render a verdict on a text and place it safely in one category or another. Rather, what is needed is an ongoing disposition of critical and charitable care in relation not merely to certain texts, but to specific characters and passages

---

[679] Ashleigh Elser, "Luther's Tears: Hagar and the Limits of Empathy" *Studies in Christian Ethics* (forthcoming).

within texts. In Muers' words, we need a sense of "ongoing *responsibility* towards that past, such that we consciously intend it to affect our life and work in certain ways."[680] One fitting way to exemplify such modulations of charitable and critical responsibility is biography, as I have sought to demonstrate. Over the course of a life, we see how charity and suspicion intertwine into the determined endurance that most characterizes living well with scripture.

Theological debates exemplify similar dilemmas and syntheses. Among other things, this dissertation is an attempt to steer both the postliberal recovery of figural reading and the liberationist attention to context away from excessively theoretical accounts of *how* reading ought to work, and toward biographical accounts of the skills, virtues, and pitfalls that attend struggles to read scripture well. As the introduction detailed, in the past several decades prominent theologians from across the ecclesial spectrum have championed figural reading as a panacea to the variously construed ills of modernity that presently beset the church. Meanwhile, liberationist theologians have suggested that the Bible can be freed from the shackles of various modes of domination through contextualization and prioritizing the reading practices of the marginalized. My attention to the three foregoing cases is indebted to both approaches. But my main concern is one that the ablest exponents of each seek to avoid: that figural or contextual reading becomes a theoretical method with which to secure an unproblematic relation to scripture beyond the bedevilments of modernity or systemic oppressions. Rather, I argue, both figural and contextual reading names the contours *within which* readers struggle to live well with scripture in all times and places.

---

[680] Rachel Muers, "Doing Traditions Justice," in *Gendering Christian Ethics,* 9.

If reading well, figurally and contextually, is tracing our lives across the pages of scripture, then the skills for doing so, and the risks that attend it, are reflected in the biographies of those who have come before. Such reading names not the solution to a problem, but the world in which the problem is endured. I did not select cases in order to show, for example, that the Palestinian struggle for liberation ought to shape every reading of Joshua. Nor did I seek to show that these cases demonstrate a certain theory of figural interpretation. Elias Chacour and Anna Jansz did not need a theory of figural relation to find themselves in the position of Naboth or or Ezra, respectively. Neither did John Jea require an account of contextual reading to find in Joseph's liberation a foretaste of his own freedom from bondage. The challenge Jansz, Jea, and Chacour faced was how they would live their lives in, as, and alongside the biblical figures who presented them with promise and painful difficulty.

This present study suggests that the most fruitful avenues for future work on moral formation and scripture—or any canonical tradition—must intermingle historical, contextual, and textual approaches. Without neglecting the role of both purely historical-critical work and conceptual theological accounts—such as my first two chapters—accounts of the ongoing significance of the Bible must center the reception of specific stories in the lives of ordinary Christians across time and place. This is not a call for reception history as a chronicle of changing interpretations. Rather, what is needed is attention to how particular passages of scripture have shaped particular communities. For example, this study briefly engaged with the book of Jonah in its fourth chapter. What are the wounds that attend the story of Jonah and its various receptions? What are the blessings that innovative readings have brought about for certain readers? Such a reception history would not be an account of changing ideas, but of affects, dispositions, blessings, and peril. Such histories would be both descriptive and constructive, textual and

contextual. It would trace the interweaving of scripture with communities of readers across time and space in order to answer this question: what does this text now demand, and of whom, given all it has signified thus far?

Such studies would be geared not toward arriving at a settled reading. Rather, they would seek to establish the contours of readings and so discern practical maxims that guard against previous mistakes. This would be a kind of tending whose purpose is new fruit.

I imagine such tending along the lines of Stanley Hauerwas' account of the significance of both history and scripture for Christian theology. He writes

> The work of theology is…never finished…not only because we live in a world of change, but more important, because the story we tell resists any premature closure. That story….forces us to acknowledge that the past is not the past until it has been redeemed, the present cannot be confidently known except in the light of such a redemption , and the future exists only in the hope made possible by the cross and resurrection of Jesus. In short, at least one of the tasks of theology …is to provide a timeful reading of the scripture for our time.[681]

Providing a "timeful" reading of scripture requires not only a sense of what the present moment requires, but also a deep historical sense of how scripture has been embedded in the lives of those now dead. It is this deep rootedness that can allow new fruit as the church reads scripture together. The Spirit speaks not only out of the present moment, but also out of all that the past has meant. Among other things this dissertation is a plea for contemporary church communities to take seriously both the promise of that history and its profound pain, so that the Spirit may enable them to claim that promise again in wisdom and liberating fortitude. Without an awareness of that pain, our hands may prove unable to receive the promise. A turn to biography is no guarantee of success, but it may enable readers to see the challenge of their reading more holistically.

---

[681] Stanley Hauerwas, *Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 17.

A typology of wounds, ways of tending

With this broader sense of what it means to live with difficult texts in mind, I turn in this section to a typology of the wounds my three case studies have displayed, broadened by inclusion of some I have not dealt with. Then I turn to the modes of tending exemplified by my cases. This forms a comprehensive account of the phenomenon that has been my central concern.

The first case, that of Anna Jansz, illustrates the first of three types of wound I will survey, that of dissonance between the discursive world of scripture and one's own. For those encountering the "wound of failure," scripture becomes enmeshed in the hopes and fears of their own life in such a way as to trigger disappointment, confusion, and perhaps doubt about the Bible's witness. This is most visible in millenarian movements but it characterizes more ordinary Bible-reading as well. (Chacour too faced this difficulty in relation to the Beatitudes.) In Jansz's case the "wound" is not so much associated with some suffering and oppression as it is with the language-world of the Bible as such. Does this strange world of the Bible truly penetrate, define, and speak to one's own? This is the question that faced Anna Jansz.

This difficulty not only faced Jansz, it always faces those who find the world of the Bible too strange to embrace. Many classic accounts of theologians wrestling with scripture fit this first type of wounding. As I noted in my first chapter, until encountering Ambrose and his later conversion Augustine could not feel at home in the discursive world of scripture. He had believed that "the law and the prophets could not be defended."[682] The Bible seemed "unworthy in comparison with the dignity of Cicero."[683] Though Maximus does not relate the same experience autobiographically, this is the implicit rhetorical framework of his *On Difficulties in Sacred*

---

[682] Augustine, *Confessions*, 5. 14. 24.
[683] Augustine, *Confessions*, 3. 5. 9.

Scripture, in which he responds to questions from interlocuters about how to understand scriptural lacunae. In the book of Jonah "how," Maximus echoes one troubled monk, "is God being truthful when He gives the order for the destruction of the city but then does not destroy it?"[684]

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber's autobiographical reflections describe the tension of such a rupture precisely. Buber relates a conversation with an observant Jew about the slaughter of the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15, especially Samuel's dismemberment of King Agag. Even as a boy, Buber describes how he was "horrified" by the pitiful declaration of Agag and the merciless violence of Samuel.[685] As an adult, Buber suggests that "Samuel has misunderstood God."[686] This discomfits but ultimately accords with his more observant interlocutor's sensibilities. Buber notes that when a Jew must choose between "God and the Bible" it is not surprising that "he chooses God…Him in whom he can believe."[687] Buber's tone here is not that of liberal triumph, but of painful searching. He can never be sure that his own moral response to the text does not evade God's word. And so, Buber confesses, "even today I still cannot read the passage that tells this otherwise than with fear and trembling."[688] As Emily Filler summarizes, Buber's recollection here demonstrates that "'the God in whom [one] believes' and the God of the Bible sometimes diverge in ways that may cause the biblical reader great pain."[689] Filler notes that Buber's moral commitment is noteworthy, for he refuses to accede primacy to his own moral

---

[684] Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture,* 64.28, p. 509.
[685] Martin Buber, *Meetings: Autobiographical Fragments* (New York: Routledge, 1967, 2002), 62.
[686] Buber, *Meetings,* 63.
[687] Ibid.
[688] Ibid., 65.
[689] Emily Filler, "Making a Philosophical Problem Our Own: Peter Ochs' Pragmatic Historiography," in ed. Mark Randall James and Randi Rashkover *Signs of Salvation: A Festschrift for Peter Ochs* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021), 111.

sense even as he confesses that God is the author of that sense and thus cannot countenance butchery: "His passionate refusal to believe" that God ordered the slaughter of the Amalekites "rests on perpetually shaky ground."[690] Contemporary debates about scripture's historical and scientific accuracy that consume so much public attention find their place here, in my typology, as a wound of intelligibility. Just as for Anna Jansz, the young Augustine, and Martin Buber, many modern readers find that the discursive world of scripture is alien to the world in which they find themselves, and thus a potentially painful cleavage opens between scripture and their own experience.

John Jea and Elias Chacour both demonstrate a second type of wounding and one which has been my primary focus: the pain that comes when scripture is entangled with some form of human oppression. In both cases, aspects of scripture and its reception make it a hindrance as well as a help in enduring the evils of slavery for Jea and displacement for Chacour.

The remarkable memoir of the Anglican theologian John Hull provides a window into a similar wounding that may be experienced by the disabled. Hull lost his sight in middle-age and chronicled not only the experience of doing so, but what effect it had on his life with scripture. For Hull, even the Bible's first words became a reminder that it was written for and by the sighted. "'God saw that the light was good'…here we come upon one of the great stumbling blocks that the Bible places in the way of blind people. It speaks of values that, for them, cannot be values. It announces that God is on the side of, and has a preference for, a world that is not their world—a reality to which they have no access."[691] For Hull this alienation gradually faded as he learned to see this feature of scripture as incidental to its redemptive witness, and he found

---

[690] Filler, "Making a Philosophical Problem Our Own*," Signs of Salvation,* 113.
[691] John Hull, *In The Beginning There Was Darkness*, 2.

new ways in which the Bible spoke to him as a blind man. Just as "God is beyond light and darkness," he found, so too are "blind people" made "in the image of God."[692]

Cases that share a family resemblance with Jea, Chacour, and Hull abound. As I briefly noted in my first two chapters, scripture's metaphors of sinful Israel as a woman justly raped with divine approval wounds readers who have suffered sexual violence. The household codes of the New Testament have wounded not only the enslaved seeking liberation, but women seeking recognition of equal worth, dignity, and giftedness as leaders in churches and families. So too have queer readers whose desire has been stamped as the fruit of idolatry by Romans 1, and baptized Jewish readers living with the polemics of the New Testament. In all these ways and more, scripture wounds readers whose suffering is bound up with scripture as a legitimizing force.

The present work has left mostly unaddressed a third type of wounding: scripture rightly wounds human sin and pride. As I noted briefly in the second chapter, when the Word of God comes to the rich young ruler in Matthew 19, he "went away grieving, for he had many possessions." When Israel gathers at the temple after its first exile and receives anew the requirements of the Torah, "all the people wept when they heard the words of the law" (Nehemiah 8:9). Here, perhaps, tears of gratitude were mingled with tears of shame and loss. This wound is perhaps nowhere better expressed in scripture than in the prophet Nathan's denunciation of David in the wake of his murder of Uriah and rape of Bathsheba: "You are the man!" Nathan declares after his parable of the poor man and his lamb incites David's righteous outrage (2 Samuel 12:7). David's agonized pleading in Psalm 51 forms what is perhaps scripture's most

---

[692] Ibid., 48.

eloquent articulation of this wound of contrition; in modern hymnody "Amazing Grace" is its most moving rendition.

These three typologize the wounds of scripture's readers. Christians may be wounded by the divorce felt between the discursive world of scripture and their own. They may wounded by and in scripture as it is bound up with some form of oppression and suffering. And they may be rightly wounded by the gracious testimony of scripture as it convicts of sin and teaches a proper sense of wretchedness in the wake of which a true restoration can come.

Each of these types of wounding calls for different response, but they are joined together by this common refrain: Christians receive scripture not merely from a book, but from the shape of one another's lives. Such mediation responds to each of these wounds distinctly.

When the discursive world of scripture feels alien, in the first type, it is the shape of another's life that sometimes enables it to become home again. Ambrose's deft figural preaching illuminated new worlds within scripture for Augustine. Maximus' patient work enabled the monks who wrote to him to see how the problems they observed were manifestations of a more fundamental beauty. Maximus' work and Augustine's *Confessions* are both mature statements of ones who have found themselves at home with scripture at last. In these works the Bible, that initially alien discourse, now describes the world with more depth and vividness than any other text.

The writings of Anna Jansz, I argued, traced a similar homecoming. First the scriptures describe, in her Trumpet Song, a world transformed. When this fails, she revisits the site of this failure, exegetically, in order to find a way in which her world may be narrated scripturally once more. This struggle leads to her death, but in her final *Testament,* she succeeds in that struggle. Part of what makes Anna Jansz's recovery so fragile is the fragility of her community. Jansz had

David Joris and he, it would seem, was of little help. Isaiah Jansz would not have his mother. But she did have some companions, and her son would have her written testimony and the memory of sacrifice. More importantly, Jansz demonstrates the centrality of one virtue in enduring this difficulty: hope. Her hope that Christ yet speaks through 2 Esdras and Revelation enabled her to find in those words a more enduring notion of the witness of the elect. Such hope is indispensable to those who tend such wounds of dissonance. It underlies both Martin Buber's uneasiness and Augustine's willingness to listen to Ambrose.

The second wound—the intermingling of scripture with oppression—similarly requires scripture's social embodiment for its tending. John Jea, like Anna Jansz, figures a lonelier path to endurance. But he too, as I have argued, found community. Jea received scripture from an angel. Here, among other things, we should be reminded that all creation witnesses to Christ. Stars, animals, trees, and angels alike may be the means by which scripture takes on new significance for human readers. But Jea is not without human companions either. In his early preaching he was joined by a fellow emancipated slave, and at the end of his life he preached amid a shifting congregation. His life became a means through which they received scripture's witness. His story illustrates the centrality of courage as a virtue necessary for the bold embodiment of scripture in cases when its meaning has seemed to be exhausted by those who use it for wrong.

Elias Chacour reaffirms the centrality of mediation and companionship even as he exemplifies a distinct but related virtue. Elias Chacour received scripture first on his mother's lap, in stories of his Galilean "Compatriot." He received it too from his father's love for their enemies, even as that love led to a crisis for Chacour's sense of self-assertion in the face of Israeli dispossession. He received scripture as well from Jewish teachers who help him see the story of Naboth in a new and liberating light. Like Jea's courage, it is Chacour's fortitude that aided him

in continuing to embody scripture otherwise than his Israeli and Christian Zionist opponents would insist.

The third wound, that of rightful conviction, relies too on social and embodied mediation. When the word of God wounded the pride of David, it was through Nathan's prophetic speech and witness that David could repent. So too, for Ezra and the people, and the rich young ruler and Christ. Amid such wounding, the word of God exists not simply as an external and static judgment, but as judges and friends on the path to restitution.

In each of these cases, compassion superintends the capacity of readers to turn from victims of alienation, oppression, or accusation, respectively, into agents who come home, endure, or make restitution. As I suggested in the second chapter, the virtue of compassion, in reading, names one necessary aspect of a reader's engagement with the text. Compassion enables the reader to see the text's difficulties as their own, and their neighbor's as bound up with the same struggle. Compassion for one's self enables an appropriate response to accusation not less than alienation and oppression. Such compassion, too, governs those occasions in which the appropriate response is separation from the wounding passage until a better reading might be found.

These cases suggest that the fractures of a community coinhere with the wounds of scripture's readers. Jansz's community is broken in myriad ways—the upheavals of Reformation-era Europe most broadly and the schisms of the Anabaptist movement in particular. Those fractures are of a piece with her own fractured reading of scripture. They coinhere, the one reinforcing the other. Jea is wounded by scripture not in the abstract, but through the Atlantic fracture of racialized slavery that subordinated Africans to white Europeans. Chacour would have suffered no alienation from the Beatitudes had the peoples of Palestine not been ripped in two.

So too communal endurance, restitution, and repair accompany and coincide with the healing of scripture's wounds. For each of these three readers of scripture, repairing their scriptural wounds coinhered, in turn, with an attempt to restore just community. In no case did that involve a thin reconciliation with those who had wronged them. Chacour insists on the right of return even as he foreswears the right of revenge. Jea forms a multiracial working-class community on the underside of racial capitalism and does not acquiesce to those who deny his ministry. Jansz dies defiantly articulating the shape of a faithfulness her executioners could join. In each case, the break in community coinhered with a break with scripture. But just as each demonstrated an endurance in their scriptural life—Jansz's hope, Jea's courage, Chacour's fortitude—that same endurance was manifested in their will to solidarity. Their lives demonstrate that just as we receive scripture from each other, so too our life with scripture requires the tending of just and loving community. To put it as Eugene Rogers does, "interpreting forms the community, and the community forms the interpreter."[693] Christians do not so much have a hermeneutic as embody one.

Embodied response to scripture as participation in the wounds of Christ

I conclude with first a philosophical and then a theological restatement of the theme of embodied and participatory reading in the wake of rupture. First, the philosophical.

Wittgenstein wrote that the central conceptual problem moderns have with language arises from our desire to impose universal formulae on that which is necessarily particular. "When we believe that we have to find that order, the ideal, in our actual language, we become

---

[693] Rogers, *Aquinas and the Supreme Court*, 97.

dissatisfied with what are ordinarily called 'sentences,' 'words,' 'signs.'"[694] This struggle to impose universal and procedural solutions on the quirks of language-use leads Wittgenstein to one of his most famous comments. "A *picture* held us captive. And we couldn't get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably." [695] The picture I have struggled against here is the notion that the difficulties of scripture can be solved through theoretical hermeneutical procedure. This is a picture that, once embraced, treats every instance of the wounding the foregoing case studies have described as matters of misinterpretation. For Wittgenstein, the solution to such captivity is therapeutic encounter with ordinary language use. "What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use."[696] Such therapy has as its criteria for success not a complete resolution of difficulties, but the ability to continue, to say of whatever practical or philosophical endeavor: "Now I can go on!"[697]

Scriptural difficulties, I have suggested, are like this, in terms of the sense of entrapment and the mode of repair. Once difficulties arise—through apocalyptic movements, or the embeddedness of slavery in scriptural communities, or nationalistic conquest—they cannot be resolved simply by an adjustment of exegetical procedure. Such adjustments are necessary but insufficient. In these instances, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, "we cannot get outside the difficulty, for it lies in our scriptures, and our scriptures seem only to repeat it to us inexorably." Instead of narrowly hermeneutical responses, we must "bring scripture back from its metaphysical to its everyday use." By attending to particular cases of ordinary people negotiating the difficulties of scripture, we can better see the way scriptural language both ensnares because of human sin and

---

[694] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §105.
[695] Ibid., §115.
[696] Ibid., §116.
[697] Ibid,. §154, §179, §183.

liberates by the Spirit's grace. Attending to such examples may allow us to say: "Now we can go on!" Scripture takes shape in our lives, and so our responses to scriptural challenges must be resolved within the shape of our lives as well.

Though not a Christian, in *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein himself reflected on the difficulty of Christian scripture in this way. He suggests that scripture puzzles because it is a text bound up with embodied practice and not merely assent to intellectual propositions. "Why is this Scripture so unclear? If we want to warn someone of a terrible danger, do we go about it by telling him a riddle whose solution will be the warning? – But who is to say that the Scripture really is unclear? Isn't it possible that it was essential in this case to 'tell a riddle'?"[698] Whether intentionally or not, Wittgenstein here repeats patristic accounts of the therapeutic nature of scripture's stumbling blocks — they draw readers in and stimulate not merely passive reception but active and embodied response. Like Irenaeus and many others before him, Wittgenstein goes on to suggest that the fourfold presentation of the Gospels incites its readers to discern in them a single spirit, in and through the letter. Existential commitment rather than intellectual assent befits such a text and such a God. "Not, believe this narrative with the belief appropriate to a historical narrative, rather: believe, through thick and thin, which you can do only as a result of a life."[699] Characteristically terse, he declares: "Only *love* can believe the Resurrection… What combats doubt is, as it were, *redemption.*"[700] A poignant assertion since Wittgenstein did not believe the resurrection.[701]

---

[698] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* translated by Basil Blackwell, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980), 31e.
[699] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 31e.
[700] Ibid. Emphasis original.
[701] "I cannot utter the word "Lord" with meaning. *Because I do not believe* that he will come to judge me; because *that* says nothing to me. And it could say something to me, only if I lived *completely* differently." Ibid.

Wittgenstein's words here encapsulate much of what this work has argued. The difficulties of scripture are bound up with the kind of thing scripture is and the ways in which we necessarily receive it, as fallen and finite beings. Christians are wounded as we receive this precious gift. For all its perspicuity in essentials, scripture is also sometimes a riddle whose continuity with the painful riddles of our own histories may wound us. These wounds arise not simply through misinterpretation, but because scripture is mediated through sinful human lives—something we cannot escape or theoretically correct. And yet, the Spirit draws us to herself by this very mediation. Such healing is visible not principally as a reconfigured theory of the text, but in and as communities, practices, and lives.

Belief in the authority of scripture therefore has more the character of abiding faithfulness than scientific certainty. It is the certainty and doubt of relation. But here the relation is not just to a text, much less a theory of reading, but with the God who enlivens reading. As Hans Frei puts it, "scripture is sure, not of itself, but because the witness of God to scripture is sure and constant."[702] Submission to the authority of scripture is a declaration of faith that God will, as in the vision of dry bones in Ezekiel 37, bring new life out of what seems dead. For such faith to be living, it must itself take bodily and social form in practices of reading and community. "Only *love* can believe the resurrection," Wittgenstein declared. Only embodied practice can believe the authority of scripture.

Finally, I conclude with two theses that revisit these philosophical themes in a more directly theological register. These final reflections are designed to re-situate my historical and constructive work within classical loci of Christian theology. These theses are first, that reading

---

[702] Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, 194.

well is akin to suffering well. And second, that we are not saved from our texts and bodies, but in them. These two are designed not to be new insights, but restatements of the ongoing theme of reading as participation in Christ.

First, reading scripture well is akin to suffering well. Of itself, suffering is evil. However, suffering for the sake of the good is not only commendable, but may be a mode of participation in Christ. Karen Kilby states that when we look at the lives of the martyrs, we do not rightly celebrate their suffering, but the existential commitment that leads them to live as if death were not. "In those lives where we perceive the presence of Christ in this distinctive way, what we perceive is a kind of denial, in practice, to any kind of ultimate reality to suffering and loss …even as the actor is destroyed in the process."[703] Their defiant life that delivers them to death is, as it were, "a kind of *enacted privatio boni.*"[704]

Suffering of this sort conforms humans to the image of Christ. On the cross, Jesus completes his willful life of enduring suffering with love, as though death were not. That life was a gamble, a prayer. The resurrection is the Father's unwavering confirmation of the Son's incarnate venture. Christians may participate in this same prayer when, in ways both large and small, they live as though death and evil were not. In doing so they may be, like Paul "in [their] flesh completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body" (Colossians 1:24). Suffering for righteousness' sake thus participates in Christ's overthrow of death and conforms to Christ those who so suffer.

Reading in hope is characterized by the same endurance that marks the martyrs. In both, an enacted response to the love of Christ forms a wild patience. Anna Jansz's wisdom was bought

---

[703] Karen Kilby, *God, Evil, and the Limits of Theology,* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 136.
[704] Kilby, *God, Evil, and the Limits of Theology,* 136. Emphasis original.

at the price of her enduring hope that the words of scripture had to speak life and not death, a hope which did lead to her death. Jea's courageous liberation and Chacour's fortitude emerged through a similar kind of endurance. Reading scripture well, if these cases may be any guide, may require an unwavering refusal that the death we meet in our reading of the scriptures has any final sway over our lives. Such commitment may prove costly—Jansz's execution, Jea's masters' taunts, and every torment comprehended in Chacour's plea: "were we too not children of the promise?"—but its fruit is new life.

Here we might also recall the spiritual "There is a Balm in Gilead." The original quotation from Jeremiah 8:22 is a question, not a statement. "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" But as Howard Thurman first put it, the enslaved authors of this hymn "straightened the question mark in Jeremiah's sentence into an exclamation point: 'There *is* a balm in Gilead.'"[705] In embodied response to scripture, enslaved Africans in North America believed with their bodies and voices, turning the Bible's question marks into sentences made of lives. This, I think, is what M. Shawn Copeland means when she writes that the slave narratives teach us "how to suffer suffering."[706] This enactment and embodiment mediates scripture. When Christians sing this spiritual, they ought to remember what it cost to enliven Jeremiah's words. The same endurance that marks a properly Christian approach to suffering for the good marks embodied Christian reading. Reading well is akin to suffering well because reading scripture well is something we do with our flesh.

---

[705] Howard Thurman, *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1975), 42.
[706] M. Shawn Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified,* 36.

Second, just as we are saved not from matter but in in it, so too we are not saved from our texts and histories, but in them. At the risk of a digression I must begin here by noting a parallel with Karl Rahner's distinctive approach to the doctrine of concupiscence. For Rahner, concupiscence names the inertia of fleshly desire. In its fallen state, that desire is disordered. We want the right things in the wrong way and at the wrong time. Because of this, we tend towards destructive gratification. What Rahner notices is that the stubborn persistence of human desire acts not only as a brake on our conformity to Christ; it also hinders our complete collapse into self-absorption. So, for example, "concupiscence in the theological sense shows itself…just as much when a man blushes in the act of lying as when the 'flesh' refuses to follow the willingness of the 'spirit' for the good."[707] The stubborn inertia of our habitual bodily impulses slows us down so that in this life a human "never becomes wholly absorbed either in good or in evil."[708] Rahner's thought here is innovative but it is nonetheless also deeply consonant with earlier Christian thought on the topic. The reason the angelic fall was immediate, in classic Thomistic accounts, was that the angels had no bodies to restrain the totality of their rational choice against God.[709] We do. Our desires ensnare both our perfection and our complete dissolution. If we tend towards destructive gratification, we tend also towards preservation.

Our bodies are not that from which we escape but that in which the Spirit joins us to Christ's body. As Eugene Rogers puts it, the solidity of our desire is the "hook in the flesh" by

---

[707] Karl Rahner, "The Theological Concept of Concupiscentia" in *Theological Investigations,* I, translated by Cornelius Ernst, (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), 366.
[708] Rahner, *Theological Investigations* I, 369. Concupiscence in its negative sense is "only *one* aspect of concupiscence; regarded in its full theological sense, concupiscence is just as much capable of working in a positive sense as a resistance of nature to the bad moral decision, by making this less absolute….thus…it cannot be characterized as morally evil," 369. However, concupiscence is not therefore a kind of neutral quality. Its ultimate redeeming nature is to add a kind of greater weight to the human's eventual orientation toward Christ. "Integrity was given to Adam not so much for the sake of avoiding a greater danger of sin, as for making possible an exhaustive engagement of his being in a personal decision directed to the good," 372.
[709] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* I, q. 63, a. 6.

which we are captured and "pulled up."[710] This is possible because Christ has made deathly matter the site of new life. Patristic soteriologies of Christ as the "fishhook" by which the devil was snared tend to be rated poorly by contemporary theologians, on grounds of the apparent deception involved on God's part and a rejection of debt owed to the devil.[711] However the chief point of such accounts, on my reading, has always been the ironic use of decaying matter against death itself. Wondrously, the tools of dying undo death. As Gregory of Nyssa puts it, "the divine was hidden by the veil of our nature, in order that, as in the case of greedy fish, the hook of the divinity might be swallowed with the bait of the flesh, and thus when life came to dwell in death and light shone in the darkness, that which is understood as the opposite of light and life might be utterly destroyed. For it is not in the nature of darkness to remain in the presence of light, nor death to exist where life is active."[712] In the incarnation flesh ceases to be merely the stage for death's slow victory and becomes the arena of creation's transfiguration. At Mary's consent the Spirit "befriends matter"[713] and opens the way for our materiality to be a means not of separation from Christ, but union with him. And so too for Rahner our desires, properly directed, may become "the form in which the Christian experiences Christ's sufferings and suffers them himself to the end."[714] The hook that ensnares death pulls us up from out of ourselves.

As with my discussion of suffering above, there is a parallel here between the ambivalent status of human bodily desire and the messiness of the human history through which scripture

---

[710] Eugene Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 232.
[711] See Nicholas Constas, "The Last Temptation of Satan: Divine Deception in Greek Patristic Interpretations of the Passion Narrative," in *Harvard Theological Review* 97:2 (2004): 139-163, especially 145.
[712] Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Discourse,* translated by Ignatius Green (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2019), 24.4.
[713] Eugene Rogers, *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources Outside the Modern West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 55.
[714] Rahner, *Theological Investigations* I, 382.

comes to us. The Spirit does not deliver us entirely from this history, but befriends it and allows it to become an aid to our salvation. Like our desires, the stumbling blocks of scripture are both a real sign of human sin and a means by which we may find ourselves turned away from sin.

Such tools of salvation befit a God who became flesh. "Oh happy fault, that merited so great, so glorious a redeemer!" declares the Paschal Exsultet. The disarming joy of an incarnate savior is this great reversal: our weakness has become the means of our liberation. To redeem humans, God did not deliver us from our humanity, but became human. In the same way, the Spirit brings life out of the wounds of history, enabling faithful living with and through scripture as it intertwines with those wounds. This is not to reduce to reduce hermeneutics to Christology or suggest a static parallel. Rather, as my first two chapters argued, it is to suggest that in reading scripture Christians may be conformed to Christ, a process that includes and does not evade the wondrous wounds of the crucifixion. Scripture, like the resurrected Christ, bears wounds that heal. And so as with our flesh, we are not saved from these texts but in them as we endure with charity in order to be conformed to Christ.

But not alone. Scripture's social mediation enables its wounds, but the foregoing cases indicate also that Christians are not trapped by this mediation, just as the Father does not allow dying flesh to entrap the Son. These very means by and through which Christians find ourselves wounded by scripture—our histories, our bodies—are the means by which we may give and receive scripture in *new* ways. We receive scripture through the shape of one another's lives, and we pass it on through the shape of our own life and the communities in which we participate. John Jea is not constrained without remainder by scripture's material entanglement with slavery—though he cannot escape it. Rather, he is able to form more just communities and pass on his own life as an icon through which scripture's liberating patterns may be read anew. So too

Elias Chacour is not locked into binary opposition to Zionist readings of the conquest narratives. He is not condemned to perform the role of Amalek, Esau, and Ishmael to an Israeli Samuel, Jacob, and Isaac. Rather, he re-reads election to place Palestinian Christians among the elect *and* the Gentiles. Anna Jansz does not simply reproduce the pain of apocalyptic readings. She is not consigned to perform the role of a prophet's aide to David Joris. Instead, through her struggle she passes on a new vision of patient apocalypticism to her son, and the tradition that would commemorate her. For each of these three, scripture arrives in their lives in and through the conditions that wound them. But the embodiment that allows these harms also allows them to show forth patterns of life and ways of reading that pass scripture on to others for the better. Isaiah Jansz will receive the scriptures from his mother's pen, if not on her knee, and John Jea's congregants from his singing. Chacour's readings of Cain and Abel, Naboth and Jezebel will inspire his students and readers just as centuries earlier Augustine received scripture from Ambrose.

But why, if scripture wounds, would we keep returning to it? During this writing, a friend pressed this question upon me several times. Especially for those who have suffered traumas related to the Bible, why endure? For any who do persist, the answer must be something like Peter's answer to Christ: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). What I have sought to make clear is that this answer can be most fittingly claimed existentially. The history of scripture's entanglement with human lives includes much pain. Taking up this bloody history of wounds, the Spirit writes new words with human bodies. If scripture, like Christ, bears wounds that heal, those wounds heal in the shape of friendships, communities, and occasionally lonely witnesses. To tend the wounds of scripture is to tend a life in love.

Bibliography

Aers, David. *Versions of Election: From Langland & Aquinas to Calvin & Milton.* South Bend, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2020.

———.*Beyond Reformation? An Essay on William Langland's Piers Plowman and the End of Constantinian Christianity.* South Bend, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2015.

Alighieri, Dante. *Paradiso.* Translated by Robert Durling. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

———.*De vulgari eloquentia.* Translated by Stephen Botterill. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Amanat, Abbas and John J. Collins, editors. *Apocalypse and Violence*. New Haven, CT: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 2004.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* revised edition. New York: Verso Books, 2006.

Andrews, William. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Anzaldua, Gloria. *Light in the Dark/ Luz en el Oscuro.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* New York: Harcourt Inc., 1973.

Ateek, Naim. *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*. MaryKnoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.

———.*A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*: *The Bible, Justice, and the Palestine-Israel Conflict.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017.

———.*A Palestinian Cry for Reconciliation.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008.

Augustine of Hippo. *Confessions.* Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

———.*On Christian Doctrine.* Translated by D. W. Robertson, Jr. Prentice Hall, NJ: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1958.

———.*The Works of Saint Augustine: Sermons, (230-272B) on the Liturgical Seasons*. Volume III/7. New York: New City Press, 1993.

———.*The City of God.* Translated by William Babcock (New York: New City Press, 2013

Aquinas, Thomas. *The Summa Theologiae*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948.

Ayres, Lewis and Stephen Fowl. "(Mis)Reading the Face of God: *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church.*" *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 513-528.

de Bakker, Willem. "Lost in Translation: Re-examining the Sources of Early Dutch Anabaptism." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 92/1 (January 2018): 54-91.

Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *The Moment of Christian Witness.* Translated by Richard Beckley. San Francisco, Ignatius Press: 1994.

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Edited and translated by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. 14 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75.

———.*The Epistle to the Romans* Translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns. New York: Oxford University Press, 1933, 1968.

Beit-Hallahmi, Benjamin. *Original Sins: Reflections on the History of Zionism and Israel.* London: Pluto Press, 1992.

Behrendt, Stephen and A. J. H. Latham, and David Northup, editors. *The Diary of Antera Duke, An Eighteenth Century African Slavery.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Bender, Harold. *The Anabaptist Vision.* Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944.

Berthelot, Katell. "Philo of Alexandra and the Conquest of Canaan." *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007): 39-56.

Black, Jeremy. *The Atlantic Slave Trade in World History.* New York: Routledge, 2015.

Blissett, Luther. *Q.* Translated by Shaun Whiteside. New York: Harcourt, 2000.

Blowers Paul. *Exegesis and Spiritual Pedagogy in the Quaestiones ad Thalassios of Maximus the Confessor.* Ann Arbor, MI: Dissertation Information Service. 1989.

Boersma, Hans. *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017

Bourke, Vernon. *The Essential Augustine.* Indianapolis: Hackett, Publishing, 1974.

van Braght, Thielemann Jans. *The Martyrs Mirror*, translated by Joseph Sohm. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1949.

Bretherton, Luke. "Political Theology, Radical Democracy, and Virtue Ethics; or Alasdair MacIntyre and the Paradoxes of a Revolutionary Consciousness" *Political Theology* 22/7 (2021), 627-649.

———. *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019.

Briggs, Sheila. "Can an Enslaved God Liberate?" *Semeia* 47 (1989): 137-153.

Brown, William P, editor. *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

Buber, Martin. *Meetings: Autobiographical Fragments.* New York: Routledge, 1967, 2002.

Butts v. Penny. *English Reports Full Reprint Vol. 84 - King's Bench,* 1011. 1677. Accessed online through the *Commonwealth Legal Information Institute.*

Bynum, Caroline Walker. *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond.* Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

———. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Significance of Food to Medieval Women.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

Calder, Mark. *Bethlehem's Syriac Christians: Self, Nation, and Church in Dialogue and Practice.* Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2017.

Callahan, Allen Dwight. *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

Cameron, Michael. *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine's Early Figurative Exegesis.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Candler, Peter. *Theology Rhetoric, Manuduction, or Reading Scripture Together on the Path to God.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.

Cardenal, Ernesto. *The Gospel in Solentiname,* trans. Donald Walsh. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. 4 volumes published 1976-1982, republished as a single volume in 2010.

Carr, David. *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origin.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

Carter, Craig. *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis*. Grand Rapids, Baker Academic Press, 2015.

Cavell, Stanley. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

Chacour, Elias with David Hazard. *Blood Brothers.* Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1984, 2003.

———with Mary Jensen. *We Belong to the Land.* South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001.

———."A Palestinian Christian Challenge to the West." In Naim Ateek, editor, *Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992.

———with Alain Michel. *Faith Beyond Despair: Building Hope in the Holy Land.* Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2002, 2008.

Chrétien, Jean-Louis. *Under the Gaze of the Bible.* Translated by John Marson Dunaway. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.

Chrysostom, John. *Homilies on the Statues.* Translated by W.R.W Stephens. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889.

Cohn, Norman. *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.

Cone, James. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013.

———.*The Spirituals and the Blues.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1972.

Constas, Nicholas. "The Last Temptation of Satan: Divine Deception in Greek Patristic Interpretations of the Passion Narrative." *Harvard Theological Review* 97:2 (2004): 139-163.

Copeland, M. Shawn. *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018.

Cugoano, Ottobah. *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery: and Commerce of the Human Species*. London, 1787.

Cunningham, Andrew and Ole Peter Grell. *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine, and Death in Reformation Europe.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Cyril of Jerusalem. *Catechetical Lectures.* In *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* vol. 7. Translated by Edwin Hamilton Gifford. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894.

Davis, Ellen. *Opening Israel's Scriptures.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Dawson, John David. *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001.

Derrida, Jacques. *Limited Inc.* Translated by Jeffrey Mehlmann. Northwestern University Press, 1988.

———. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Donabed, Sargon. *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

Donaldson, Laura. "Making a Joyful Noise: William Apess and the Search for Postcolonial Method(ism)." *Interventions,* 7:2: 180-198.

———. "Writing the Talking Stick: Alphabetic Literacy as Colonial Technology and Postcolonial Appropriation." *American Indian Quarterly* 22/1-2 (1998): 46-60.

———."Joshua in America: On Cowboys, Canaanites, and Indians." In Mark Vessey, editor, *The Calling of the Nations: Exegesis, Ethnography, and Empire in a Biblical-Historic Present.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.

Douglass, Frederick. *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Volume 2: 1847-54.* Edited by John Blassingame. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.

———.*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.* New York, Barnes & Noble Classics, 1845, 2003.

Driedger, Michael. "Thinking Inside the Cages: Norman Cohn, Anabaptist Münster, and Polemically Inspired Assumptions about Apocalyptic Violence." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions,* 21/4 (2018): 38-62.

Duitsman Cornelius, Janet. *When I Can Read My Title Clear: Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South.* Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991.

Dula, Peter. *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Earl, Douglas. *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture.* Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010.

Eco, Umberto. *The Search for the Perfect Language.* Translated by James Fentress. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1995.

Elia, Matthew. "Ethics in the Afterlife of Slavery: Race, Augustinian Politics, and the Problem of the Christian Master." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38/2 (2018): 93-110.

Elliott., E. N., editor. *Cotton is King and Proslavery Arguments.* Augusta, GA: Pritchard, Abbott, and Loomis, 1860.

Elowsky, Joel, ed. *Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament IVb: John 11-21.* Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2007.

Elser, Ashleigh. "Luther's Tears: Hagar and the Limits of Empathy." *Studies in Christian Ethics* (forthcoming 2022).

Engels, Friedrich. *The Peasant War in Germany.* Translated by Moissaye J. Olgin. London 1850.

Ephrem the Syrian. *The Repentance of Nineveh*. Translated by Henry Burgess. London, 1853.

Epp Weaver, Alain. *Inhabiting the Land: Thinking Theologically About the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict.* Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018.

———.*Mapping Exile and Return: Palestinian Dispossession and a Political Theology for a Shared Future.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.

Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself.* London, 1789. Made available through *Documenting the American South,* University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Eve Beachy, Kirsten. *Tongue Screws and Testimonies.* Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks.* Translated by Richard Philcox.. New York: Grove Press, 2008.

Felder, Cain Hope. *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015

Fisk, Bruce. "Canaanite Genocide and Palestinian Nakba in Conversation: A Postcolonial Exercise in Bi-Directional Hermeneutics." *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies* 18.1 (2019): 21-49.

Frei, Hans. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974.

———.*The Identity of Jesus Christ.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997.

Fourth Lateran Council, 1215. Translated by H. J. Schroeder in *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation and Commentary*. St. Louis: B. Herder, 1937.

Fulkerson, Mary McClintock. *Places of Redemption.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Gates, Jr., Henry Louis and William Andrews, editors. *Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment 1772-1815*. Washington, DC: Civitas Counterpoint Press, 1998.

———.*The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Gerbner, Katharine. .*Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.

Gilroy, Paul. "Suffering and Infrahumanity." The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Yale University, February 21, 2014.

———. "Never Again: Refusing Race and Salvaging the Human." Holberg Lecture, University of Bergen, Norway, June 4, 2019.

Givens, Tommy. *We the People: Israel and the Catholicity of Jesus.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.

Glancy, Jennifer. *Slavery In Early Christianity.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Goizueta, Roberto. *Christ our Companion: Toward a Theological Aesthetics of Liberation.* New York: Orbis Books, 2009.

Gordon, Joseph. *Divine Scripture in Human Understanding: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Bible.* South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 2019.

Gregory, Bradley. *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Gregory the Great. *Moral Reflections on the Book of Job.* Translated by Brian Kerns. Collegeville, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2014.

———.*Forty Gospel Homilies.* Translated by David Hurst. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1990.

Gregory of Nyssa. *Catechetical Discourse.* Translated by Ignatius Green. Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2019.

———. *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes.* Edited and translated by Stuart George Hall and Rachel Moriarty. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993.

Griffiths, Paul. *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Gronniosaw, James Albert Ukawsaw. *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself*. Bath, 1772. Made available through *Documenting the American South,* University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Guth, Karen. "Moral Injury, Feminist and Womanist Ethics, and Tainted Legacies." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38/1 (Spring 2018): 167-186.

Guscin, Mark. *The Image of Edessa.* Boston: Brill, 2009.

Halivni, David Weiss. *The Book and the Sword: A Life of Learning the Shadow of Destruction.* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux Publishers, 1996.

Hamilton, Alastair. *The Apocryphal Apocalypse: The Reception of the Second Book of Esdras From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Hanley, Ryan. *Beyond Slavery and Abolition: Black British Writing c. 1770-1830.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe* 26 (2008): 1-14.

Hastings, Adrian. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, Nationalism.* London: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Hauerwas, Stanley and Jean Vanier. *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness.* Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008.

———.*Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words.* Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005.

Havrelock, Rachel. *The Joshua Generation: Israeli Occupation and the Bible.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020.

Hegel, G.W. F. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Volume 1: Manuscripts of the Introduction and the Lectures of 1822-3*. Translated by Brown and Hodgson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995

Herdt, Jennifer. *Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition***.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Hobsbawm, Eric. *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality,* second edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Hodges, Graham Russell. *Black Itinerants of the Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea and George White.* Madison House Publishers: Madison, WI, 1993.

Horsch, John. "Is Dr. Kuehler's Conception of Early Dutch Anabaptism Historically Sound?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 7/1 (January 1933): 52.

Huebner, Christopher. *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity.* Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2006.

Hugh of St. Victor. *Noah's Ark*, in *Hugh of Saint-Victor: Selected Spiritual Writings.* Translated by the Religious of C. S. M. V. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1962.

Hull, John. *In the Beginning there was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversation with the Bible.* London: SCM Press, 2001.

Hunsinger, George. "Truth as Self-Involving: Barth and Lindbeck on the Cognitive and Performative Aspects of Truth in Theological Discourse," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61/1 (Spring 1993): 41-56.

Hut, Hans. *On the Mystery of Baptism,* in *The Radical Reformation.* Translated by Michael Baylor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Irenaeus of Lyons. *Against the Heresies.* Translated by Dominic Unger and John Dillon. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992

Jabès, Edmond. *The Book of Questions, Volume 1.* Translated by Rosemarie Waldrop. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1972.

Jackson, Rebecca. *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress.* Edited by Jean McMahon Humez. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* Boston, 1861. Made available through *Documenting the American South,* University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

James, Mark Randall. *Learning the Language of Scripture: Origen, Wisdom, and the Logic of Interpretation.* Boston: Brill, 2021.

———and Randi Rashkover. *Signs of Salvation: A Festschrift for Peter Ochs*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021.

Jea, John. *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself* (Portsea, 1816). Made available through *Documenting the American South*, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Jennings, Willie. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. New Have: Yale University Press, 2010.

———."Wrestling With a Wounding Word: Reading the Disjointed Lines of African American Spirituality." *Modern Theology* 13:1 (January 1997): 139-170.

———.*Acts.* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

———."Reframing the World: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21/4 (2019): 388-407.

Joldersma, Hermina and Louis Grijp. *Elisabeth's Manly Courage: Testimonials and Songs of Martyred Anabaptist Women in the Low Countries.* Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2000.

Johnson, Matthew, James Noel, and Demetrius Williams *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.

Jorstad, Mari. "Precious Portions," Presentation at the Society of Biblical Literature. San Antonio, 2021

Joris, David. *The Anabaptist Writings of David Joris:1535-1543.* Edited by Gary Waite. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994.

Julian of Norwich. *Revelations of Divine Love.* Translated into modern English by Elizabeth Spearing. London: Penguin Books, 1998.

Kadman, Noga. *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Israel and the Depopulated Palestinian Villages of 1948.* Translated by Dimi Reider. Bloomington, IL, Indiana University Press, 2015.

Karkov, Catherine, editor. *Poetry, Place, and Gender: Studies in Medieval Culture in Honor of Helen Damlico.* Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008

Kaufman, Asher. *Reviving Phoenicia: In Search of Identity in Lebanon.* London: IB Tauris, 2004.

Kautsky, Karl. *Communism in Central Europe at the Time of the Reformation.* Translated by J.L. & E.G. Mulliken. London: Fisher and Unwin, 1897.

von Kerssenbrock, Hermann. *Narrative of the Anabaptist Madness.* Translated by Christopher Mackay. Boston: Brill, 2007.

Khalidi, Walid. *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948.* White Plains, Maryland: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992.

Khoury, Rafiq and Rainer Zimmer-Winkel. *Christian Theology in the Palestinian Context.* Berlin, AphorismA Verlag, 2019.

Kilby, Karen. *God, Evil, and the Limits of Theology.* London: T&T Clark, 2020.

King Jr., Martin Luther. "The Christian Way of Life in Human Relations." Address Delivered at the General Assembly of the National Council of Churches. St. Louis, MO: December 4, 1957.

Klaassen, Walter. *Living at the End of the Ages: Apocalyptic Expectation in the Radical Reformation.* New York: University Press of America, 1992.

Klein, Herbert. *The Atlantic Slave Trade,* 2nd edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Krueger, Derek. *Liturgical Subjects: Christian Ritual, Biblical Narrative and the Formation of Selfhood in Byzantium.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.

Langland, William. *Piers Plowman,* C-text. Edited by Derek Pearsall. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2008.

Levering, Matthew. *Participatory Biblical Exegesis.* South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 2008.

Levine, Amy-Jill. *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus.* New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Ligon, Richard. *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados.* Edited by Karen Ordahl Upperman. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2011.

Lindbeck, George. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age.* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984

Lloyd, Vincent. *Black Natural Law.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

———.Lloyd, *In Defense of Charisma.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.* Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984.

Louth, Andrews. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament I, Genesis 1-11.* Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2001.

Lowry, James, "Stierf Anna van Rotterdam als volgelinge van David Joris?" *Doopsgezinde bijdragen* 18 (1992): 113-118.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Marrant, John. *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black, (now going to Preach the Gospel in Nova-Scotia)*. London, 1785. Made available through *Documenting the American South,* University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Marzouk, Safwat. *Egypt as a Monster in the Book of Ezekiel.* Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen, 2015.

Masalha, Nur. *Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History.* London: Zed Books, 2018.

———.*Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History.* London: Zed Books, 2018.

Masters, Bruce. *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Maximus the Confessor. *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios.* Translated by Maximos Constas. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018.

———.*On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua.* Translated by Nicholas Constas. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

McCabe, Herbert. *God, Christ, and Us,* London: Continuum Press, 2005.

McClendon, James. *Biography as Theology.* Eugene Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1974.

Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone With the Wind.* New York: Warner Books, 1936.

Moi, Toril. *The Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Morris, Benny. *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Morson, Gary Saul. "Dostoevsky's Anti-Semitism and the Critics: A Review Article." *The Slavic and East European Journal* 27/3 (Autumn 1983): 302-31.

Muers, Rachel. "Doing Traditions Justice." In Jenny Daggers, editor, *Gendering Christian Ethics.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.

Munayer, Salim and Lisa Loden. *The Land Cries Out: Theology of the Land in the Israel-Palestinian Conflict.* Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012.

Nyhof, Timothy. "The Elusive Image of the Martyr Anneke Janszdr. of Rotterdam." *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* 30/2 (Fall 2009): 30-39.

Ochs, Peter and Nancy Levene, ed. *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and the Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

———.*Another Reformation.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2011.

Origen of Alexandria. *On First Principles.* Translated by G.W. Butterworth. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2013.

———.*Homilies on Leviticus.* Translated by Gary Wayne Barkley. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1990.

———.*Homilies on Joshua.* Translated by Barbara Bruce. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002.

Packull, Werner. "The Sign of Thau: The Changing Conception of the Seal of God's Elect in Early Anabaptist Thought." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 61/4 (October 1987): 363-74.

Paul VI, Pope. *Nostra Aetate.* October 28, 1965.

Peel, William, and others. "Summary of the Report of the Palestine Royal Commission." 1937. Accessed through the *Jewish Virtual Library.*

Ploeg, Andrew. "I Will Remain Silence and Scream: Edmond Jabès, and the Wound and Witness of Language." *Shofar* 30/2 (2012): 91-118.

Prior, Mark. *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique.* Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997.

al Qass Collings, Rani and Rifat Odeh Kassis and Mitri Raheb. *Palestinian Christians in the West Bank: Facts, Figures and Trends.* Second edition. Diyar Publishing, 2012.

Radner, Ephraim. *Time and the Word: Figural Reading of the Christian Scriptures.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016.

Raheb, Mitri. *I am a Palestinian Christian.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995.

———.*The Politics of Persecution: Middle Eastern Christians in an Age of Empire.* Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019.

———.*Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible Through Palestinian Eyes.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019.

Rahner, Karl. *Theological Investigations,* I. Translated by Cornelius Ernst. Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961.

Rambo, Shelly. *Resurrecting Wounds: Living the Afterlife of Trauma.* Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017.

Ramelli, Ilaria. *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery: The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from Ancient Judaism to Late Antiquity.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Rantisi, Audeh. *Blessed are the Peacemakers: A Palestinian Christian in the Occupied West Bank.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990.

Raboteau, Albert. *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum American South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, 2004.

Radford Ruether, Rosemary. *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism.* New York: Seabury Press, 1974.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Essays on Biblical Interpretation.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980.

———.*Interpretation Theory.* Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976.

Robinson, Cedric. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* 3rd edition. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Chapel Hill, 1983, 2020.

Robson, Laura. *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East.* Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017.

———. "Peripheries of Belonging: Military Recruitment and the Making of a 'Minority' in Wartime Iraq." *First World War Studies* 7/1 (2016): 23-42.

Rodney, Walter. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa.* Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1972.

Rogers, Eugene. *Aquinas and the Supreme Court: Race, Gender, and the Failure of Natural Law in Thomas' Biblical Commentaries.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013.

———.*Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings.* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002.

———.*Blood Theology: Seeing Red in Body- and God-Talk.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

———. “How the Virtues of an Interpreter Presuppose and Perfect Hermeneutics: The Case of Thomas Aquinas.” *The Journal of Religion,* 76(1): 64-81.

———.*Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God.* Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999.

———.*After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources Outside the Modern West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005

Roth, John and James Stayer. *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism: 1521-1700*. Boston: Brill Academic Press, 2007.

Rothmann, Bernhard. *On Earthly and Temporal Power.* Translated by George Albert Moore. Moore Series, 1950.

Rowe, Paul, John Dyck, and Jens Zimmerman, editors. *Christians and the Middle East Conflict.* New York: Routledge, 2014.\

Ruffin, Thomas. *North Carolina v. John Mann*. 13 N.C. 263. 1829.

Sabbah, Michel. *Faithful Witness: On Reconciliation and Peace in the Holy Land.* New York: New City Press, 2009.

Sabra, George. “Two Ways of Being a Christian in the Muslim Context of the Middle East.” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17/1 (2006): 43-53.

Said, Edward. “Michael Walzer’s *Exodus and Revolution:* A Canaanite Reading.” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 8/3 (Summer 1986): 289-303.

———.*Culture and Imperialism.* London: Vintage, 1993.

Saillant, John. “Make a Black Life, and Bid It Sing: Sacred Song in *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea*,” *Auto/Biography Studies*, 31:1 (2016): 147.

———. “Traveling in Old and New Worlds with John Jea, the African Preacher, 1773-1816.” *Journal of American Studies*, 33/3 (1999): 473-490.

Sattler, Michael. *The Legacy of Michael Sattler.* Translated and edited by John Howard Yoder. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973.

Sarrisky, Darren. *Reading the Bible Theologically.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Second Vatican Council. “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: *Dei verbum.”* November 18, 1965.

Sedgwick, Eve. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

Shapira, Anita. "Ben-Gurion and the Bible: The Forging of an Historical Narrative?" *Middle Eastern Studies* 33/4 (1997): 645-674.

Shehadeh, Raja. *Samed: Journal of a West Bank Palestinian.* New York: Adama Books, 1984.

Smith, Adam *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes the Wealth of Nations.* London: W. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776.

Smith, James K.A. *The Fall of Interpretation.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012.

Snyder, C. Arnold and Linda Huebert Hecht, editors. *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: 16th Century Reforming Pioneers.* Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Lauerier University Press, 1996.

Sonderegger, Katherine. "The Doctrine of Inspiration and the Reliability of Scripture." In *Thy Word is Truth: Barth on Scripture*, ed. George Hunsinger. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012.

Soskice, Janet Martin. *The Kindness of God*: *Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2008

Sparks, Randy. *The Two Princes of Calabar: An Eighteenth Century Odyssey*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Stalder, William. *Palestinian Christians and the Old Testament: History, Hermeneutics, and Ideology*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2015.

Stayer, James. *The German Peasants' War and the Anabaptist Community of Goods.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991.

Stewart, Maria. *An Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall in Boston.* February 27, 1833.

Sugirtharajah, R. S. *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World.* Third edition. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006.

Terrell, JoAnne Marie. *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African-American Experience.* Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998.

Tessman, Lisa. *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

The Teaching of Addai: Texts and Translations. Translated by George Howard. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981.

Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1976.

———.*Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death.* Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1975.

Townes, Emilie, editor. *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering.* New York: Maryknoll, 2002.

Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives.* Philadelphia, PA; Fortress Press, 1984.

de la Vega, Inca Garcilaso. *The Royal Commentaries of Peru.* Lisbon, 1609. Translated by Paul Rycaut, 1685.

Wagner, Mary. "The Impact of the Second Crusade on the Angelology and Eschatology of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux." *Journal of Religious History,* 37/3 (September 2013): 322-40.

Waltner Goossen, Rachel. "Defanging the Beast: Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse." *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89/1 (January 2015): 7-80.

Walzer, Michael and Edward Said. "An Exchange: 'Exodus and Revolution,'" *Grand Street,* 5/4 (Summer 1986): 249-259.

Webster, John. *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Weems, Renita. *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

Whittemore, W. Meynell. *Sunshine for* 1874. London, 1874.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig *Philosophical Investigations.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1953, 2001.

———.*Culture and Value.* Translated by Basil Blackwell. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Wilderson III, Frank B. and Saidiya V. Hartman. "The Position of the Unthought." *Qui Parle* 13.2 (2003): 183-201.

Williams, Delores. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993, 2013.

Williams, George. *The Radical Reformation.* Kirksville, MO, Truman State University Press, 2000.

Williams, Rowan. *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel.* Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1982, 2002.

Winner, Lauren. *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

Wimbush, Vincent. *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Structures.* Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 2012.

Wolin, Sheldon. *The Presence of the Past.* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980.

Yoder, John Howard, edited by Michael Cartwright and Peter Ochs. *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Zaru, Jean. *Occupied with Nonviolence: A Palestinian Woman Speaks*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

Zijpp, Nanne van der. "Hymnology of the Mennonites in the Netherlands." *Mennonite Quarterly Review,* 31/1 (January 1957): 11-15.

Zureiq, Constantine. *The Meaning of the Disaster* (معنى النكبة). Translated by Bayly Winder. Beirut: Khayat's Blue Book Cooperative, 1948, translated 1956.

Biography

Prior to his doctoral work at Duke, Nathan Hershberger completed a B.A. in History, Philosophy, and Theology at Eastern Mennonite University. After this he received an M.A. in Religion from the University of Virginia. He is the author of four peer-reviewed journal articles: "The Wounds of Hope: Scriptural Apocalypticism and the Wisdom of Anna Jansz," is forthcoming from the *Conrad Grebel Review;* "Occupy the Jubilee: Scripture and the 99%" was published in *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* in 2016; "Patience as Hermeneutical Practice: Christ, Church, and Scripture in John Howard Yoder and Hans Frei" appeared in *Modern Theology* in 2015; and "Power, Tradition, and Renewal: The Concern Movement and the Fragmented Institutionalization of Mennonite Life" was published in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* in 2013. His fellowships and awards include the Kenan Institute for Ethics Graduate Fellowship and membership in the Kenan Institute's Religions and Public Life working group, and runner-up placement in the Harold Brown essay context. He is a member of the Society of Christian Ethics and the American Academy of Religion.